

5-22-2016

The Akan Concept of a Person

Jessica Anne Sykes
Dickinson College

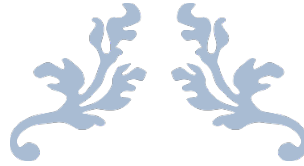
Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.dickinson.edu/student_honors

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sykes, Jessica Anne, "The Akan Concept of a Person" (2016). *Dickinson College Honors Theses*. Paper 225.

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.



THE AKAN CONCEPTION OF A PERSON



BY JESSICA SYKES

MAY 19, 2016

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF HONORS REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

CHAUNCEY MAHER, SUPERVISOR

SUSAN FELDMAN, READER

JIM SIAS, READER

JEFF ENGELHARDT, READER

Table of Contents

<u>INTROCUCTION</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>THE AKAN CONCEPTION OF PERSONS</u>	<u>6</u>
WHO ARE THE AKAN?	6
WHAT DO THE AKAN THINK ABOUT PERSONS?	8
WHY THE DISPUTE IS INTERESTING	13
CHALLENGES	15
<u>ASSESSMENT OF THE AKAN CONCEPTION OF A PERSON</u>	<u>16</u>
JOHN LOCKE	16
A COMPARISON OF THE AKAN AND LOCKE	20
APPLICATION TO MODERN SITUATIONS	27
AGAINST THE AKAN CONCEPTION OF PERSONS	33
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	<u>40</u>
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	<u>43</u>

Introduction

My life is based on the assumption that I am a person. This is an assumption that I have never doubted. If you are reading this, you too are a person. Or so I have been taught to assume. But why have I been taught this? What makes us people, and why can I be so sure of these “facts”? These questions came to me as I reflected on the different ways we treat other people compared to the way we treat non-humans. For instance, non-human animals are not subject to the same justice and legal systems as humans. I began to wonder: What are people? There is no authoritative definition of a person. In fact, what exactly a person is has been widely debated by philosophers, theologians, and average people for a long time. We do not have a consensus on the issue, but we also have not adequately explored the variety of ideas there might be. One set of ideas comes from the Akan, an ethnic group from southern and central Ghana. I am particularly interested in the Akan because they have a unique conception that seems to me to add something to the conversation. For them, a body and three souls suffice for being a person, but they also insinuate the need for biological parents, something that is left out of many other conceptions of persons.

Let me explain these claims further.

While those who debate the conception of a person all agree that they are themselves persons, they have not yet come to a consensus. What is it, exactly, that makes persons unique, distinct from non-persons? That question connects with significant contemporary issues including the beginning of personhood, as related to abortion; the differences between men and women; and the difference between people and non-human animals.

Some of the more familiar ideas about persons include those of Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant. According to Cartesian dualism, a person is a combination of the body and mind which are distinct but causally connected substances. According to Kant, a person has reason and is moral (governed by the categorical imperative).

But there are other ideas that have been completely left out of the conversation. This centuries-long debate does not consider the ideas of several smaller, less known communities. But what if those groups are the ones that have something important to add to the conversation? It is unlikely that a consensus will ever be reached, but the more ideas that are examined, the closer we can get to a satisfactory understanding. Enter the Akan people. They have something interesting to contribute to the discussion.

In particular, the Akan suggest that biological parents are necessary to be a person. Although I contend ultimately that their conception is too broad, their theory of souls has implications that add this interesting point to the conversation. This theory requires a contribution from both a biological mother and a biological father. This suggests that every person must come from the combination of a woman's egg and a man's sperm, even though they do not say it that this precisely. Many more widely discussed theorists do not hold this (even if they do not explicitly deny it). For instance, Descartes requires a mind and body, while John Locke requires memory and reason, with neither mentioning or insinuating the need for parents. In fact, in my research, I could not find a single philosopher who makes a similar point. There are philosophies that speak to the role and responsibility of parents, but not their significance for being a person. In due course, we will explore why this is an important difference in their

conceptions of a person, why it has so often been neglected, and the best reasons for believing it.

In **part I, section A**, I will provide background on the Akan people, focusing on who they are. Making up just less than 50% of the Ghanaian population, they are the largest ethnic group in the country. Next, in **section B**, I will explain in detail their conception of a person. This entails exploring the debate between Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye, two contemporary Ghanaian philosophers who have differing interpretations of the Akan conception. In an effort to determine which is more accurate, I will offer my own interpretation. **Section C** will discuss why this dispute is interesting, and **section D** will comment on the challenges in researching an ethnic group that is often overlooked, including the lack of resources and difficulty attributing a conception to a large group.

In **part II**, I will assess the philosophical merits of the Akan conception of a person. In **section A**, to provide a useful and familiar contrast, I draw on Locke's conception of a person. I will explain his belief that consciousness suffices for being a person. This will lead, in **section B**, to a comparison of Locke's conception and that of the Akan. Here, I will point out that the Akan and Locke have very little in common. I will attempt to compare Locke's notion of consciousness to the Akan's notion of three souls, concluding that these notions are distinct. In **section C**, to explore the Akan conception more fully, I will test their ideas with a few modern developments. These include artificial insemination, a third source of DNA, and same-sex partners. I will contend that the Akan conception can handle these tests. In **section D**, with all the previous parts in consideration, I will argue that the Akan conception of a person does not adequately distinguish between humans

and non-humans, but it still adds a unique point to the conversation, notably the idea of biological parents. I will also suggest that perhaps the Akan do not distinguish between humans and persons.

I. The Akan Conception of Persons

A. Who are the Akan?

Ghana was the first British colony in Africa south of the Sahara to gain independence on March 6, 1957. With a population of approximately 12,000,000 people, there are 10 regions and 108 traditional states recognized by the central government.¹ According to the 2000 national population census, just less than 50% of the population is Akan, making it the largest ethnic group in the country. Due to their large population, 44% of non-Akan Ghanaians also speak the Akan language, which is the native language in six of the 10 regions.² The word 'Akan' covers a large number of similar cultural groups, which are "homogenous both linguistically and culturally and include the Fante, Asante, Brong, Twi (Twifo), Wasa Denkyira, Sehwi, Assin, Adansi, Akyem (Akim), Akwapim, and Akwamu".³ The most powerful and well known of these groups is the Asante people, whose confederacy was established in 1701. They were then made a colony by the British in 1901. The Akan area is rich in gold and diamond, and the economy flourishes from hoe agriculture and the cultivation of cocoa as an export crop.

¹ Warren, Dennis M. "The Akan of Ghana: An Overview Of The Ethnographic Literature." n.p.: Pointer, 1986. Africa-Wide Information. Pg 7.

² Agyekuma, Kofi [b1] (analytic). "The Ethnopragsmatics of the Akan Palace Language of Ghana (English)." Journal of Anthropological Research 67.4 (0001): 573-593. FRANCIS. Web. 27 Apr. 2016. Pg. 575

³ Warren. Pg. 7.

As we proceed, it is important to bear in mind the dangers of generalizing about millions of people. I do not hold that every Akan person agrees with my claims about what “the Akan” believe. Furthermore, I am also interested primarily in the traditional Akan people, preceding their independence in 1957. I also do not hold that all of them would have agreed with the traditional Akan beliefs that I researched. So we should understand these generalizations to stem from a way many traditional Akans lived. In light of those dangers, please bear in mind that my generalizations do not apply to everyone that is, was, or will be Akan.

Traditionally, the culture of the Akan people is based on matrilineal descent. Although many Akan people are now Christian, traditional Akan, living in rural areas, saw polygamy as “ideal”.⁴ They placed high value on children to carry on the family and the greatest bond is between the mother and child. The father, on the other hand, had no legal authority over the child.⁵ The justification of their culture and explanation of family life is told through folklore.⁶ It is used to explain ideas to children, such as the origin of death, the origin of marriage, and why the man came to desire the female. Additionally, folklore is used to teach etiquette and rules.⁷ The men tended to hunt, fish, and clear land, while the women dealt with “petty trade” at the markets. Both sexes partook in agricultural activities.⁸

⁴ Ibid. Pg. 19.

⁵ Ibid. Pg. 37.

⁶ Ibid. Pg. 63.

⁷ Ibid. Pg. 65.

⁸ Ibid. Pg. 8.

B. What Do the Akan Think about Persons?

The Akan conception of a person has two prominent interpretations, represented by Kwasi Wiredu's and Kwame Gyekye's conflicting views. Through investigation of the Akan ethnographic literature, I have developed a third view. In order to understand what the Akan think, I will compare and contrast all three.

For Wiredu, the Akan believe that a person is made of okra, sunsum, mogya, and a body (nidapua). According to Wiredu, the Akan word 'onipa', which translates to the English word 'person', is also human being. This suggests that all human beings are born persons. 'Onipa' has two meanings: a non-laudatory and a laudatory one. It can be used to say that every human being is born a person, or it can be used to laud some human's achievement of personhood.⁹ In the laudatory sense, it reflects attainment of a certain status in a society. Understood that way, personhood is a type of achievement. Based on one's fulfillment of their obligations, one can rise in degrees of personhood. Wiredu states,

[when used in this evaluative way] it implies that s/he has demonstrated an ability through hard work and sober thinking to sustain a household and make contributions to the communal welfare...Moreover, the defense of the state against external attack was the responsibility of all.¹⁰

This speaks to the obligations each individual has, and the level of completion leads to higher degrees of personhood, according to Wiredu's interpretation of Akan thought.

⁹ Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Indiana University Press: 1996. Pg. 159

¹⁰ Ibid. Pg. 160.

Wiredu defines 'okra' as a quasi-physical, life-giving entity. He calls it a "principle" in a person which makes him a living being and a separate entity which can go its own way if so moved."¹¹ Similarly, the presence of okra in a thing means that this thing is alive and the loss of it means death.¹² Sunsum is equivalent to one's personality. It is believed to die when the person herself dies, so it is not spiritual (non-physical) because spiritual things can continue after the death of the person. The combination of the father's semen with a female blood then creates "the frame of the human being to come".¹³ Finally, Wiredu translates the Akan word 'mogya' as 'blood', which he interprets as partially material.¹⁴ He believes the mogya comes from the mother and determines clan identity.¹⁵

Gyekye, on the other hand, thinks the Akan have a dualistic conception of persons. That is, according to Gyekye, the Akan believe people have a physical part and a spiritual (or non-physical) part. He interprets the Akan's spiritual component as including okra and sunsum. For him, okra is the transmitter of destiny.¹⁶ He refers to destiny as fate, how one will end up, the outcome of one's life, including all choices from birth to death. Because okra is "identical with life," Gyekye holds that it is similar to a soul, as it is commonly understood in Western thinking. He links okra to honhom, breath. While both notions help distinguish between the living and the dead, okra causes breathing and

¹¹ Wiredu, Kwasi. "The Concept of Mind with Particular Reference to the Language and Thought of the Akans". From *Readings in African Philosophy*. Sefu Kwame. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995. Dickinson College Library Catalog. Print. Pg. 133.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Pg. 158.

¹⁴ Ibid. Pg. 128.

¹⁵ Ibid. Pg. 157-158.

¹⁶ Gyekye, Kwame. *An Essay On African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. n.p.: Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987., 1987. Dickinson College Library Catalog. Print. Pg. 85.

breathing is evidence of okra.¹⁷ He translates 'sunsum' as spirit, which he distinguishes from soul. The words 'spirit' and 'soul' can often refer to the same thing, but Gyekye claims that they do not do so here. His translation is often disputed, but he rejects claims that the spirit is physical, mortal, or from the father.¹⁸ He defines 'sunsum' as personality, "a set of characteristics as evidenced in a person's behavior – thoughts, feelings, actions, etc."¹⁹ For him, these psychological (non-physical) qualities are derived from the Supreme Being and are therefore divine and immortal.²⁰

We can see the seemingly dualistic character of the Akan's concept of a person in the relation between okra and honam, or body. As we continue, I will refer to okra and sunsum as individual souls, but together they make up Gyekye's interpretation of the spiritual part of a person. Gyekye holds that okra and sunsum together make up the spiritual (non-physical) part of the person, and the body is the physical substance it "relates to". Gyekye says the Akan ideas of body and spirit are dualistic, but the Akans often refer to their makeup as a homogenous entity due to the close relationship between body and spirit. This stems from the notion that the souls (okra, sunsum) reside in the blood and are part of the body.²¹ Gyekye points out that this theory is not supported by the Akan theory of souls and their belief in life after death. So, he claims that souls are a spiritual entity. The soul is immortal, which works only if it is not physical.²² So, the conception of a person for the Akan, according to Gyekye, is dualistic and interactionist.

¹⁷ Ibid. Pg. 88.

¹⁸ Ibid. Pg. 89.

¹⁹ Ibid. Pg. 90.

²⁰ Ibid. Pg. 91.

²¹ Ibid. Pg. 99.

²² Ibid. Pg. 100.

The body has causal influence on the souls and vice versa; they reflect each other's conditions.²³

Focusing on their descriptions of okra, we can see one good way where Wiredu and Gyekye differ on the Akan conception of persons, captured in Table 1 (below). For Wiredu, okra is the key distinguishing element for his, which he claims is incorrectly frequently translated into English 'soul.' As we have seen, Wiredu thinks okra is soul-like but "quasi-physical," or "almost physical," while Gyekye cites the Akan belief in the ancestral world, where the ancestors' spirits live on after death, to discredit Wiredu's claim.²⁴ Gyekye thinks the Akan believe okra persists after the death of the person, but should it be quasi-physical, it would lose life with the body.²⁵ Wiredu and Gyekye also disagree on where sunsum comes from. Wiredu states it comes from the father, while Gyekye believes the Akan think it comes from the Supreme Being.

Table 1: Comparison of Necessary Conditions for Gyekye and Wiredu

Elements	Gyekye	Wiredu
Body	✓	✓
Sunsum	✓ Spirit, personality, non-physical, from the Supreme Being	✓ Personality, from the father, not spiritual
Okra	✓ Transmitter of destiny, non-physical, spiritual	✓ Quasi-physical, life-giving
Mogya		✓ Blood, partially material

²³ Ibid. Pg. 101.

²⁴ Warren Pg. 31.

²⁵ Ibid. Pg. 86.

Looking to some relevant ethnographic literature, I have interpreted each condition to determine which is more accurate. I think we can say that traditionally the Akan hold that a person has three souls: mogya, sunsum, and okra. Note here that my conception mirrors Wiredu's conception, but differs slightly from Gyekye's (see Table 2 below). On my proposal, the key terms have somewhat different meanings than they do for either Gyekye or Wiredu. Mogya, which enters at conception, is the same type of blood as the mother that controls the lineage. For Gyekye, this soul is not required for personhood, but simply makes that a child part of the mother's family, not the father's. Next, sunsum is a spiritual substance (non-physical) from the father. It is responsible for the "character, genius, temper or quality of a person".²⁶ It is qualitatively the same as the father's. Finally, okra comes from God (the creator) and enters at birth. It is the "sustainer of the person's conscience and life" and influences actions.²⁷ Here, conscience includes a person's thoughts, which influence her decisions, her ability to think, and to have a moral compass, while life is one's existence and capacity to grow. So, according to my interpretation of the Akan conception of a person, babies—new born persons—are made up of the mother's blood and the man's spirit with a third contribution from God, which then returns to him at death. Sunsum, on the other hand, the basic character, dies with the person and is the same as the father's.

²⁶ Ibid. Pg. 12.

²⁷ Ibid.

Table 2: Comparison of Necessary Conditions for Gyekye and Wiredu with My Conception

Elements	Gyekye	Wiredu	My Conception
Body	✓	✓	✓
Sunsum	✓ Spirit, personality, non-physical, from the Supreme Being	✓ Personality, from the father, not spiritual	✓ Non-physical, spiritual, from the father
Okra	✓ Transmitter of destiny, non-physical, spiritual	✓ Quasi-physical, life-giving	✓ From God, sustainer of conscience and life
Mogya		✓ Blood, partially material	✓ Blood from mother

C. Why the Dispute is Interesting

The philosophical debate over the correct interpretation of the Akan conception of a person will never end with a rigorous proof. So why bother with their conception of persons?

I am exploring this topic to see what a good result will look like. Ultimately, we hope to have a generally illuminating articulation of what a person is, but the immediate issue of this thesis is to sort out the correct interpretation of the Akan conception of a person. Why should we care about the dispute between Wiredu and Gyekye over how to *interpret* their view? In order to include their conception in the larger conversation, we must first have a reasonable interpretation of their views. There are no primary sources written from any traditional Akan people that explain their conception of a person. So we are left to determine their beliefs through ethnographic research. We have to engage the

debate between Gyekye and Wiredu because their research has led them to conflicting views. In order to determine who has the correct interpretation, I did my own ethnographical research and came up with a third interpretation. Each interpretation helps us see what counts as a reasonable interpretation.

The more general issue is why we should care to understand what a person is. I addressed this briefly in my Introduction. Lots of reasonable people assume that people deserve a specific sort of treatment that non-people (including dogs, monkeys, ants, rocks, flowers) do not, simply because they are people. For example, because I am a person, I will not be legally or morally punished if I kill an ant or a spider, but I will be legally punished if I kill another person. I am morally and legally permitted to choose to have an education and a job, while non-human animals do not have the choice. Dogs, for example, are trained to serve in various capacities which we could call jobs and education, such as guides for the blind and police search. But these dogs are chosen by humans and do not volunteer or have any say in the matter.

We human people treat other “things” differently depending on whether they are people or non-people. Non-people are typically taken to include plants and non-human animals. It is permissible to kill an animal or plant and eat it, but it is impermissible to kill a human and eat it. While plants can acquire energy from the sun alone (they are autotrophs), people and animals must gain energy from at least some other living things (they are heterotrophs). People, it is generally thought, are able to, even obliged to, follow laws and rules, but non-human animals and plants are not. These are just soe interesting differences. What ultimately underwrites them? What is it about persons that separates

us from non-persons? Why exactly do we deserve the special status we claim for ourselves, and deny to other creatures?

D. Challenges

As I indicated in the Introduction, the Akan people have been largely overlooked in Western scholarship. It is not just philosophers that do not talk about the Akan people, but it is also anthropologists and historians that have not done *much* (but some) research. This makes it difficult to determine whether Gyekye or Wiredu has a stronger interpretation of the Akan thought and leads to a peculiar method of ethnographic research. In particular, it makes it difficult to get an independent perspective on the Akan, a perspective on what they think independent of what Gyekye and Wiredu say they think. Through fairly broad searches of philosophical, sociological, and historical databases, I found limited discussions of the Akan, but enough to support my own interpretation of what the Akan think. Thus, I was able to take a stand on the debate between them. However, my research did not consider the same amount or variety of sources as someone who was researching, for instance, “the American perspective” (whatever that might be) would have found.

This suggests a weakness about what I can legitimately claim to show, how accurate my interpretations are, and if there are any other plausible interpretations out there. However, I can report that I read a large percentage of the available documentation and written record of this under-studied community. While I do not claim to have captured the beliefs of every Akan person (which would be difficult for any group, too), I

believe I have found ample support for my claims about traditional Akan beliefs. As we will see, however, this thesis opens the doors to more research.

II. Assessment of the Akan Conception of a Person

A. John Locke

In Western Anglophone philosophy of persons, conversations often begin with John Locke, the 17th-century English philosopher and influential figure in the Enlightenment. His ideas differ in interesting ways from those of the Akan. By looking at them, we can find some strengths and weaknesses in the Akan conception. Locke says that a person is “a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places, which it does only by consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it”.²⁸ This famous remark from Locke states that our consciousness allows us to remember and reflect, and possessing this same consciousness throughout time signifies that we are the same person as one that existed at some earlier time. We will explore this claim further.

In brief, Locke believes that consciousness is sufficient for being a person. More specifically, the ability to be conscious (aware) of past and future actions and thoughts defines what it is to be a person. Locke denies that the soul is important for being a person. In Locke’s discussion of persons, two issues are entwined: persons, and the

²⁸ Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. London: T. Tegg, 1841. Print. Pg. 217.

persistence of persons. The persistence of persons is simply the way in which one and the same person can exist across a period of time, from one moment to another. A key philosophical question here is what it takes for a person to persist. Locke is known for stressing that memory is important for persistence. We are primarily interested in his claims about persons, but his claims about persistence will provide interesting insight for our inquiries.

Table 3: Sufficient Condition for Locke

Sufficient Condition
Consciousness (memory and reason)

In order to understand what Locke thinks persons are, we must understand his notion of consciousness and, for him, the related notion of memory. His ideas of consciousness and memory, however, are not entirely clear. The word ‘consciousness’ has been and continues to be contested. Locke’s conception of consciousness includes reasoning and memory, but not the ability to feel pain and have self-awareness. But I will clarify how he uses ‘consciousness’ to the extent that it will help later. In book II chapter XXVII of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke explains that consciousness is a necessary and sufficient condition of personhood. Without appealing to consciousness, he claims, we cannot ensure that persons do indeed persist over time.

Locke believes a person persists when there is “sameness of a rational being”.²⁹ To this end, Locke states that persistence (or identity) “consists in nothing but a

²⁹ Ibid. Pg. 218.

participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized body”.³⁰ In other words, he emphasizes the continuation of the same consciousness through time, “united to the same organized body”. As time continues, we are the same substance—we *persist*—if we are able to recall our previous thoughts and actions. Locke argues that persistence over time is a continuity of something “mental” (similar to how we have been using spiritual). He explains that as we grow older, our bodies grow and adapt; they change. So, our bodies are not the continuous element, but we still persist, so it must be some “mental” aspect.

Locke argues that consciousness is sufficient for being a person, and that it is also crucial in our persistence over time as the same substance.

Locke opposes the idea that persistence of a body suffices for personal identity, but he does think a body is necessary for there to be a man at all. He states,

it is not the idea of thinking or rational being alone that makes the idea of a man in most people’s sense, but of a body, so and so shaped, joined to it; and if that be the idea of a man, the same successive body not shifted all at once, must, as well as the same immaterial spirit, go to make of same man.³¹

Here Locke uses the body to distinguish between man (human) and person. He acknowledges that many people think that to be a “man” is to have a certain sort of body, and that *if* this is true, then persistence of a person’s body should suffice for the persistence of that person. While he does not agree that it suffices for persistence, Locke argues that body does matter for being a man.

³⁰ Ibid. Pg. 215.

³¹ Ibid. Pg. 217.

Using the example of a rational, discursive parrot, Locke argues that reason and speech do not suffice for being a man, even if they are necessary, for a man must also have a certain body-type, a *human* body. In his example, a prince travels to Brazil and converses with a parrot in a logical manner. He was able to tell the prince that he belongs to a Portuguese and takes care of chickens. Despite these human-like features and ability to have a rational conversation, in re-telling the story, the prince continued to refer to the animal as a parrot, and not a man, suggesting the necessity of a particular body. He states, "For I presume it is not the idea of a thinking or rational being alone, that makes the idea of a man in most people's sense, but of a body, so and so shaped, joined to it".³² A specific type of body is associated with being a man. And while the parrot demonstrated reason and consciousness, Locke claims the lack of a human body means he does not fit the necessary means of being a man. His consciousness is only necessary for being the same person over time. Consciousness and reason are not individually sufficient to make the parrot a man, because the right body is also necessary. His conception of a man requires a specifically *human* body, but he does not specifically say what a human body is. He distinguishes between a human body versus all other organisms, where a human body is simply not an animal or plant body and no non-human animal body is a person, but he does not explicitly define a human body.

But this body is not necessary or sufficient for a person. Using his example of the prince and the cobbler, we can see that Locke requires consciousness, particularly the ability to have the same consciousness over time, for a person. In this instance, Locke describes a scenario where the consciousness of the prince enters the body of the

³² Ibid.

cobbler. The cobbler will appear, to everyone else, to be the same person, because “in the ordinary way of speaking, the same person, and the same man, stand for one and the same thing.”³³ However, Locke clarifies that this only sufficiently determines the cobbler as a man. Instead, “consciousness makes the same person” and “the same immaterial substance, or soul, does not alone, wherever it be, and in whatsoever state, make the same man.”³⁴ In other words, the material object that this non-physical substance is in does not matter for it to be a person; the past memories that the non-physical part recalls, even if from a different body, make it the same person.

Since consciousness and memory are essential for being a person, one might wonder what Locke thinks about moments of forgetfulness or more sustained memory loss. When we forget, are we not the same person? When our “consciousness” changes—say, when we are dreaming—are we not the same person? Locke’s concept of memory claims that we are the same person if we can be conscious of our previous actions and thoughts. While we cannot recall and forget something *simultaneously*, we can recall something that we *previously* forgot. Presumably he will also need to hold that if a person temporarily forgets her past, that (past) person might still continue to persist.

B. A Comparison of the Akan and Locke

While Locke holds that consciousness is the sufficient condition of a person, the Akan people emphasize okra (the sustainer of life) and sunsum (character, personality). Depending on the interpreter, the definitions of each of those Akan concepts vary, as do

³³ Ibid. Pg. 221

³⁴ Ibid. Pg. 222

the definitions of other elements that, in conjunction, make up a person. However, as Table 4 (below) shows, there is no clear commonality between Locke and all three interpretations of the Akan conception. We will see that they have instructively different views about the relative importance of the body, some non-material aspect, and the role of biological parents.

Table 4: Comparing Akan Necessary Conditions to Those of Locke

Elements:	Locke	Gyekye's Conception	Wiredu's Conception	My Conception
Body		✓	✓	✓
Consciousness	✓			
Sunsum		✓	✓	✓
Okra		✓	✓	✓
Mogya			✓	✓

While the Akan's conceptions require some sort of body for being a person, Locke does not. For Locke, it is only important for being a man, but he does not stress its importance for a person. While I cannot speak with absolute authority, the Akan appear to require simply a body of some sort. They also do not speak with absolute clarity on the subject. Locke requires a human body for a man, but he does not explicitly spell out what he means by a human body, besides that it is different from all other organisms, where no non-human animal body is a man.

Next, consciousness is a necessary element for Locke, but not the Akan. We have seen that Locke sees *memory*—the ability to have memories of oneself at an earlier time—as a defining characteristic of the persistence of the same person over time. The Akan conception, however, under all interpretations, states that okra and sunsum are

defining non-physical characteristics of a person. While my definition and Wiredu's also include mogya, Gyekye relies solely on the two common non-physical elements. So, we have the following for the Akan:

X is a person if and only if X has:

- A. A body;
- B. Okra, a non-material transmitter of destiny;
- C. Sunsum, something responsible for the character, whether it comes from the father or not.

My interpretation and Wiredu's add an additional element, D:

- D. Mogya, the mother's blood which enters at conception and makes one part of the mother's lineage.

How do each of the non-physical conditions (B-D) compare to Locke's notion of consciousness? Are the Akan and Locke talking about the same or different things? How are they the same or different?

Okra is generally defined as the evidence of life. Wiredu claims that it comes from God before the person is even born, and that its "presence in the body means life and whose absence means death."³⁵ Gyekye claims that it is the transmitter of destiny. He says it is the fate and outcome of a person's life. Wiredu and Gyekye disagree about whether it is physical. While Wiredu holds that it is "quasi-physical," or "almost physical," Gyekye argues that because the Akan believe in the spirit world, if the okra were "quasi-physical," it would become extinct with death. This, he claims, contradicts their ideas

³⁵ Wiredu, Kwasi. "The Concept of Mind with Particular Reference to the Language and Thought of the Akans." Pg. 133

about spirit and ancestry.³⁶ In both cases, however, okra remains the evidence of life. My conception of a person also holds that okra comes from God and enters at birth. Okra influences actions, and it controls one's conscience and life, where conscience is one's thoughts about what is right and wrong, which influence one's decisions, and life is existence and the capacity to grow.³⁷

My definition of 'okra' brings in an element of conscience, but it is important to distinguish this from Locke's idea of consciousness. First, we can explore further how the Akan understand conscience. Okra and conscience are distinct in the sense that okra controls conscience. Conscience is a moral compass that is supported and created by okra, but okra is necessary for a person. Conscience is an important, but not necessary, element of a person, but okra is necessary. It becomes sufficient only when combined with a body and sunsum. Locke's consciousness, on the other hand, is a necessary component of his conception of a person, but is not necessarily a moral compass, but primarily rational thinking and awareness. None of the three definitions of okra portray it as a sort of memory, or reflective thinking, like Locke's consciousness.

Sunsum is the next important but contested term in the various interpretations of the Akan conception of a person. For Wiredu, sunsum is one's personality. It is believed to cease at death, so it is not immortal. But Wiredu claims that since our dreams often take place in a different setting to where we are actually sleeping, the sunsum leaves our body when we dream and has a mind.³⁸ It also comes from the father.³⁹ While I agree

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid. Pg. 12

³⁸ Ibid. Pg. 134.

³⁹ Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* Pg. 158.

with Wiredu that sunsum comes from the father, I hold that that it is non-physical. I claim that sunsum is held to be responsible “for the character, genius, temper or quality of a person.”⁴⁰ This non-physical something is qualitatively the same as the father’s and perishes at death. Gyeyke, however, believes sunsum is psychological and spiritual because it is personality, or “a set of characteristics as evidenced in a person’s behavior – thoughts, feelings, actions, etc.”⁴¹ In addition, he holds that the Akan think these traits come from the Supreme Being, making them divine and immortal, instead of from the father, making them mortal.

Despite these differences, we can still assert that sunsum is not the same as Locke’s consciousness. In general, the Akan notion of personality differs from Locke’s memory and rational thinking. Personality traits relate to actions and express themselves through behavior. Personality, in this sense, is supposed to partly underwire or unify our behaviors. For instance, if someone has the ‘kind’ personality trait, they are more likely to do a friend a favor or help a stranger than someone with the ‘mean’ trait. Memory, however, is how we look back on these actions in the future, with no control on present actions past the extent that we learn from the past. One’s personality is not necessarily an ability to call to mind something past, even if it relies on that ability. Likewise, an ability to call to mind a past experience is not a stable trait that influences the present when it acts.

The concept of mogya marks the divide between the three interpretations of the Akan conception of persons. On Wiredu’s interpretation and mine, okra (life) and sunsum

⁴⁰ Warren. Pg. 12.

⁴¹ Gyekye. Pg 90.

(personality) with a body are not sufficient for being a person. Any non-human animal, too, I believe, would also not meet this description, because they too must have mogya. That is not to say that nothing could meet this description, but humans and non-human animals do not. Mogya, the blood of the mother, enters at conception and makes the child part of the mother's lineage, considering the child part of the mother's family as opposed to the father's. Matrilineal descent tends to be rejected by many Western cultures, where children tend to take their father's last name, signifying that they continue his lineage. This unique aspect of being a person is not mentioned in Gyekye's interpretation. But, again, mogya is not equivalent to Locke's consciousness. Mogya concerns only one's lineage. It implies biological parents, which is not an element of Locke's consciousness, and is simply the transmission of blood.

Another important difference between the Akan's conception of a person and Locke's conception is that the Akan conception suggests persons must have biological parents. Because persons must have mogya and sunsum, which must come from the man and woman who create the child, persons must have parents. By contrast, Locke's conception of a person has no mention of parents of any sort. A body and consciousness do not require a biological contribution from another human in general. However, it is biologically proven that we human persons are conceived by the insertion of a male's semen into a female's egg. This fact of parentage is missing from Locke's conception of a person; he appears to think it is inessential. This is important because it does not seem to be an accident that everything we consider to be a person has parents. Why does Locke leave it out? And why do others?

We have seen that individually, each necessary condition of the Akan conception of a person does not resemble Locke's consciousness. But what about when we combine them all? If we take the ideas of destiny, personality, and mother's blood, are they equivalent to Locke's notion of thinking and reasoning, able to recognize the same self over time? No. While the two conceptions of persons each touch upon overlapping characteristics of persons, Locke's consciousness and the Akan's mogya, sunsum, and okra are distinct. The Akan conditions tend to focus more on the way we act and where our personality traits come from (with contributions from a mother, father, and Supreme Being) while Locke emphasizes internal thoughts and reflection. Just like we saw in comparing sunsum and consciousness, the Akan conception focuses on the way persons appear to others, with the important components coming from others. Locke, on the other hand, considers what goes on inside our minds, that which is apparent only to ourselves.

However, we should also point out that my claims are based off the alleged distinctions between persons, humans, and individuality and distinctness. This point relates to the comparison of Locke and the Akan because Locke is clearly trying to separate man from person, but the Akan perhaps do not admit this difference. Locke is making two separate claims – one about man and one about persons – but neither is what the Akan are saying. Should they make this distinction? It is not obvious that they need to make this distinction. This could account for the differences between their conception and Locke's. Since I did not encounter any evidence that suggests the Akan think non-humans can be persons, maybe ultimately, the Akan conception is just not different from their conception of humans.

C. Application to Modern Situations

A reasonable person might think that recent developments pose problems for the Akan conception of a person. For instance, it may seem that artificial insemination, or a third source of DNA, or same sex partners challenge the Akan conception because these things challenge something about the putative need for parents of a more traditional sort. However, I will show that these newer ideas about parents are in fact compatible with the Akan conception of persons because they do not threaten the need for a biological mother and father.

We can presume the traditional Akan people did not have the same understanding of gestation or the idea of a gene that we now have. However, a defender of their conception of a person would argue that their emphasis on matrilineal descent allows for these kind of alterations in the conception of a parent. Additionally, it is plausible that the Akan must have had some notion of a “foster family” after seeing children lose parents. A proper philosophical defense of the Akan’s conception of persons should also be free to wander somewhat from what the actual Akan people thought or might have thought.

Artificial insemination raises an interesting problem for the Akan conception of persons because the donor might not be the parental figure apart from this biological connection. Does the Akan conception require the biological mother and father to raise the child and play the traditional role? Does it matter if these necessary souls transmit the personality and traits from people the child will never meet? This introduces an interesting distinction between biological and non-biological parents. This is important because the biological parents are not necessarily the ones who raise the child and play

a parental role. Another point to consider as we dissect the Akan conception's application to modern situations is foster families. While the traditional Akan people probably did not have the idea of artificial insemination, they arguably would have had room for genuine persons not raised by their biological fathers, since they would have certainly seen children lose parents—and they did not uniformly refuse personhood to such children. So, the traditional Akan culture must have had some notion of a “foster family.” The Akan conception, however, could still conceive of the child as a person. In this instance, the conception process occurs and the same souls would still be combined – one from the man, one from the woman and one from a Supreme Being. The Akan conception does not explicitly state that the child must be created through “natural methods,” in other words sex, and raised by their biological parents, or that the male and female contributing the souls have to then raise the child.

However, some tension arises upon examining sunsum and mogya. While the okra could still be transmitted from God and enter at birth, if sunsum comes from the father and is responsible for the character of a person, does that mean they presume that someone is less of a person because the biological father who passes on their character is not their father figure? The Akan conception states that all people must have sunsum, which comes from the father. This implies that every person must have a biological father, someone who helps conceive the child and passes along his sunsum, which we have seen is transmitted biologically through the male's semen. This does not seem to imply that a person must have a “father figure”, that is, someone who raises the child and instills their values, which is not necessarily the same as a contributor of genes.

To deal with this alleged problem, we can draw upon the Akan belief in matrilineal descent and the close relationships between nephews and uncles who tend to actually take the “father role.” In defense of the Akan conception of persons, we can claim that artificial insemination still creates a person, because there is no loss of a father-figure role, in the form of the uncle, and there is still a contribution from a male, the biological father. With the best information available (of which none speaks to what happens in this situation), we could assume the mother’s side of the family would be responsible for the child if a child lost their parents. However, Wiredu explains that there are sufficient reasons for each death, and a “choice of explanations” to choose from.⁴²

Artificial insemination does not ultimately pose a philosophical problem for the Akan conception because their conditions for being a person can still be satisfied by human children that result from artificial insemination.

Next, it might seem that the idea of raising a child by two females or two males causes tension for the Akan conception, which requires both a biological mother and father. As homosexual marriages become legal in more countries across the world, this phenomenon has become more accepted and common. As a result, a child that is raised by same-sex parents, whether adopted, through in vitro fertilization, or other forms of artificial insemination, is considered a person. But this seems to threaten the Akan conception because once again, the two parents raising the child cannot biologically both be the contributors of souls. Other non-natural (aka not sex) methods must be utilized, which means there would be some influence from someone who is not a parental figure.

⁴² Wiredu, Kwasi. "DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE IN AFRICAN CULTURE." CHAPTER VII. Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, n.d. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.

However, while the conception of a human child requires semen, which must come from a male, this male does not necessarily need to be any type of father figure. Likewise, biologically, a woman's egg is required for conception, but that same female does not have to be a mother figure.

This alleged tension arising from same sex parents can be approached in the same manner as that arising from artificial insemination. In this instance, we can defend the Akan conception by holding that all three souls are still present in a child born to same sex couples (even if they come through some other unnatural method or adoption). Notice, however, that the defense of the Akan conception is stronger in the instance of a marriage between two females than two males. While dispute may arise between two females over which woman gets to claim "motherhood" and have the child follow their lineage (perhaps the one who contributed their blood and carried the fetus, if not through adoption?), one of them would still be able to continue their lineage, and any uncles could play the father role.

Greater philosophical tension arises with male-male couples. Here, if the biological mother is out of the picture, then it is not entirely clear how the child would remain part of the mother's family. Technically, the child would still be considered from the family of the biological mother, but neither she nor her brothers would be there to raise and teach the child. This does not mean the child would not be a person, however, because all three souls are present. But that claim depends on the Akan view of blood. If the egg is enough to carry the mother's blood, then all three souls are still present. This situation, however, has lots of obstacles. If the biological mother carries the baby, we can assume the blood will transfer to the baby. But if they just provide the egg and the

gestation occurs in someone else, we must determine how the blood supposedly transfers. This scenario, too, raises the question of the parental roles, in particular, the interpretation of the motherly component. A final problem for male-male couples is who exactly is the father. Does the biological father automatically assume this role? We have seen that sunsum is biological, so it must mean the man who contributes his semen is the contributor of sunsum, but that is not to say they cannot both be father figures.

More recently, the UK government became the “first country to introduce laws to allow the creation of babies from three people,” according to a Feb. 3 2015 BBC article. This method offsets defective mitochondria that could be passed down from the mother, which could lead to brain damage, muscle wasting, heart failure, and blindness. The mitochondria of a donor woman gets combined with the DNA of the two parents, which leaves the baby with 0.1% of the donor DNA and passes this change throughout generations.⁴³

This advancement could pose a problem for the Akan conception because it adds in a new donor, which could be perceived as a source of a fourth soul. More precisely, since the DNA is from a woman, this would add, we could guess, another mogya to the mix.

While adding a third source of DNA is a modern idea that the Akan probably would not have considered, their conception of a person would consider this infant a person only if the new DNA were *not* or did not bring with it a soul, because their conception of a person requires three souls. However, their conception speaks to the three necessary

⁴³ Gallagher, James. "MPs Say Yes to Three-person Babies." BBC News. BBC, 3 Feb. 2015. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.

souls, but does not say there cannot be any others as well. If the third source of DNA is considered a soul, then a fourth of soul is added, but we do not know if this is a problem. However, as we have seen, their notion of souls does not explicitly state a child can have only two parents, but only that a female and male must provide specific something. Their definition, however, of these non-physical souls does not specify DNA or any type of genetic material. But this third source of DNA would complicate their conception.

The person donating their DNA would most likely be categorized as a female in the sense that if they were to have children of their own, they would contribute their mogya to the fetus. Even though the baby only gets 0.1% of the donor DNA through this method, we cannot conclude whether the donor also influences the mogya soul. If it does influence the souls, we must then ask whether the small manipulation would affect the mogya enough to change their status of personhood. Would they have two mogya, would one overpower the other, or would the two combine into one? It seems unlikely that with such a marginal contribution, one of their main souls could be changed. But if that small change could offset the defective mitochondria, could it largely influence a person's character and lineage as well? If this DNA, on the other hand, does not have any control over the resulting souls, then the baby would satisfy the Akan requirements for being a person, not jeopardized by the addition of a third source of DNA.

Our discussion of these three examples suggests that the Akan conception of a person can cope adequately with relatively recent developments in science and society. Naturally, ambiguities arise that call for clarification and adaptation of the traditional Akan people's thinking to accommodate new ideas, but their emphasis on matrilineal descent ultimately handles well distinctions between biological parents and parental

roles. This tells us that although a male and female contribute their souls to create a baby person, they do not have to be the ones to raise it for it to be a person.

D. Against the Akan Conception of Persons

I argue that the Akan conception of persons is too broad, including some non-persons, specifically many non-human animals. This argument assumes that none of those non-human animals (including dogs, monkeys, ants, etc. but not things like flowers and rocks) are in fact persons. The Akan claim that the combination of a body, okra, and sunsum is sufficient for a person, but these criteria can also be satisfied by many non-human animals. The Akan do not specify the type of body a person must have, as we have seen, so this could include the shape of a chimpanzee, a dog, or any other non-human animal. Similarly, many animals must have something to give them life (okra) and have personalities (sunsum). For example, there are hyper and somber dogs, and friendly and mean chimpanzees, as we will see. These souls could still come from parents because animals mate and have reproductive cycles similar to people. So, the Akan conception, while it may provide *necessary* elements of a person, does not provide an acceptable sufficient conception for being a person; it does not adequately distinguish persons from many non-persons. I aim in this section to manage the debate around this conclusion, with responses and defenses.

The initial Akan conception states, as we have seen, that, at least, X is a person if and only if:

- A. They have a body;
- B. They have 'okra,' a non-material transmitter of destiny;

C. They have 'sunsum,' something responsible for the character, whether it comes from the father or not.

I argue that this is too broad because it includes some non-persons.

In defense of the Akan conception, one might ask: why are you so sure? Or how do you know which animals are not persons? As I have touched upon, each condition can be satisfied by non-human animals. Let's start with the body, for example. The Akan do not specify that a specifically human body is necessary for being a person and all animals also have a material component of some sort or the other.

Next, sunsum controls the personality and character of a person. Here we define personality as our visible behavior/appearance and distinguishing characteristics, and character as the moral and mental qualities that set an individual apart. But animals also have these same qualities because animals can range, for example, from calm to energetic, and friendly to mean. They also have characteristics that make them unique and distinguish them from one another. Not all dogs, for example, act the same way, and each one responds in a different manner to various stimuli.

Similarly, animals also have life, so would have something like okra as well.

Finally, we can look at the last element that Wiredu and I include in our interpretations of the Akan conception, mogya, which comes from the mother's blood. This is also not unique to humans, because a large number of animals also have "blood" [whether lineage or the physical matter] that could have been passed down through their mother. Therefore, the Akan conception, while it may provide necessary elements of a person, does not provide an acceptable sufficient condition for being a person.

A defender of the Akan conception might admit that some of these non-human animals really are persons, thereby concluding that the Akan conception has the conditions right. In other words, perhaps the problem is not the broadness of the Akan's conception of persons, but the narrowness of my own understanding of persons.

In response, I argue that non-human animals are often not treated the same way as humans. Even where animals come close to being people, they do not have that "classification". India has come close to defining dolphins as people, but the government primarily changed how they should be treated. They argue that dolphins should be "*seen* as 'non-human persons'" which is "far different than actually *having* the rights and protections of a 'non-human person'".⁴⁴ So there are people who advocate for the personhood status for animals, but I argue there is still something unique about humans. These animals should be treated humanely, of course, and some level of morality should be acknowledged and applied. But animals cannot understand human institutions or rules. And we eat animals and plants with no punishment. But if a shark kills a human, it is seen as a natural, biological act for their species. This suggests that there is something special and unique about humans that does not apply to any other living organism, and any conception of a person should aim to seek out that feature.

In exploring what makes humans unique, we can take for example family pets. This is the closest many people get to treating animals like people, because a family dog or cat is often considered part of the family, especially children who often grow up with these pets. But these animals do not sit at the dinner table, eat the same food, get educated

⁴⁴ Dvorsky, George. "No, India Did Not Just Grant Dolphins the Status of Humans." Io9, Gawker Media, 15 Aug. 2013. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.

or go to work, or have conversations with the other members of the family. Instead, the people are responsible for feeding the dog (no matter its age), walking it, playing with it, etc. So there must be some reason that these animals are universally treated differently. Therefore, the Akan conception, which does not include a means for acknowledging this difference, is too broad.

Finally, a third response to my analysis of the Akan conception of persons is to accept the legitimacy of my argument and to attempt to narrow their conception. It is helpful to turn to Locke here, who might be closer to the relevant part of the truth, for he offers a better way to distinguish persons from non-persons, especially non-human animals. His notion of consciousness attempts to distinguish humans from other animals, because it involves thinking and reflection that extends beyond the present. As we have seen, Locke claims that an important defining characteristic of a person is “a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places, which it does only by consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it”.⁴⁵ Here, he says our thinking and consciousness are linked, which together allow us to reason, remembering our thoughts and actions that make each individual distinct.

This claim effectively pinpoints the unique feature of persons if we could show that non-human animals do not have reason. However, whether animals have reason, and how we should define that term, is a larger debate that I cannot adequately explore here. If having a reason is to have a motive for doing something, nonhuman animals also have reasons. Animal researchers generally tend to “examine the mechanisms that are

⁴⁵ Locke. Pg. 217.

involved in various animal behaviors," but the rationality of such behaviors is unclear.⁴⁶ Animals acquire skills to do things and learn. They often count animals as having reason because they learn behaviors, whether or not they have the same sort of reflection and control over behavior that humans (and persons) do.⁴⁷ However, if we define reason to include moral sensibility or self-reflection, arguably many non-human animals do not have it, and could not count as persons, if that is required for personhood.

Even though the Akan conception of persons is too broad, it is still a valuable take on the issue because it provides something that other conceptions do not. In my research, I could not find a single philosopher whose conception of a person requires biological parents explicitly in the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a person. While there are lots of philosophies on the rights of parents, what it means to be a parent, what constitutes a family, and who should be considered a parent (which touches upon genetics), there is nothing that specifically states, or even hints at, the fact that each person comes from a male and a female.⁴⁸ For this reason, the Akan bring an interesting insight into the discussion of what it is to be a person. It appears very implausible that everything we consider a person *accidentally* has a biological mother and father. This raises the question of whether parents really should be in the definition of a person or not and why that would or would not be desired. Anyone who insists that persons must

⁴⁶ Andrews, Kristin, "Animal Cognition", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Austin, Michael W. "Rights and Obligations of Parents." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.;

Nam, Charles B. "The Concept of the Family: Demographic and Genealogical Perspectives." Sociation Today. The North Carolina Sociological Association, 2004. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.; Brake, Elizabeth and Millum, Joseph, "Parenthood and Procreation", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

be alive (in a strong sense of that word) would seem to be committed to holding that all persons have parents, since all organisms have parents, including organisms produced asexually. One might respond to this that parents are required here only indirectly, or by accident. But the Akan seem to be saying something stronger than that.

There must be some reason that, for centuries, philosophers have omitted this plausibly necessary condition for being a person (necessary because it could also apply to non-human animals). Even if a person is conceived through in vitro fertilization, there is still a contribution from both a male and a female, as we have seen in our application of the Akan conception to modern advancements. Is it perhaps so obvious that it seems unnecessary to include in the definition? Or does it perhaps just follow from the other sufficient conditions that philosophers tend to propose? The best defense and reason to leave this out would be because parents are not, in fact, necessary for being a person. But why would they think that, since we can confidently say that every person has parents. Some people may think, however, that it is just an accident or that it is not part of the definition of 'person'. I, on the other hand, have good reason to believe persons and parents are in fact connected.

Suppose the Akan do believe that parents are necessary for persons. Let us consider some arguments for and against that claim. The Akan could argue that there have been no actual cases where a person does not have a biological mother and father, so it cannot be purely accidental. Everyone that we consider a person was created biologically by a contribution from a woman and a man, no matter what method was used.

Against this argument, one could allege that it is a non sequitur. In support, one could point to cases from fiction, such as Hagrid from the *Harry Potter* series and Pinocchio from *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. Hagrid is a half giant-wizard but is portrayed like a person in the film, where he interacts with the main characters just as a normal person. As for Pinocchio, he is a wooden puppet who dreams of becoming a real boy and is known for lying. The case of Pinocchio is stronger in this instance because he was hand-made and is not the child of two biological parents.

The Akan could defend their position with respect to Hagrid, saying that he actually has parents – Mr. Hagrid and the giantess Fridwulfa. But Pinocchio cannot be dealt with in a similar way.

In defense of the Akan, these characters are both imaginary cases – neither exists in real life. While we can conceive of or imagine people without parents, there is no actual case. However, it is not clear that conceivability [what's conceivable] should settle this issue. Arguably, people without a biological mother and father is virtually inconceivable. While we can imagine it for stories, it is merely a creative license (such as fairies and ghosts, that many people believe do not really exist) and we cannot actually conceive of a real person lacking biological parents.

The inconceivability of persons without biological parents may change as technology advances, but with the current equipment, it cannot.

I cannot see these being valid defenses for philosophers not including this point. The Akan have mentioned the incorporation of biological parents through their souls mogya (blood from the mother), and sunsum (personality from the father). But there is no similar reference to parents in other arguments. I claim that the Akan have a unique

and important contribution to the conversation that should be desired and added into the definition of a person.

In bringing this additional element to the conversation, we can ask again whether the Akan actually see a distinction between humans and persons. While I set out to find the Akan conception of a person, based on the assumption that they had such a conclusion, it may be that its just not any different from humans. It looks like they are committed to saying that humans and persons are the same, even though they do not actually articulate it that way.

Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to explore what a person is, specifically observing that the conversation has neglected to learn some peoples' potentially illuminating answers to that question. Of these, I am interested in the Akan people of Ghana. I explained that the Akan conception of persons includes a body and three souls as a sufficient condition. Of these three souls, the okra comes from God, mogya from the mother, and sunsum from the father. These three souls, which are defined as life, personality, and blood, do not touch upon something unique about humans. Locke attempts to take that extra step with his notion of consciousness, but both arguments leave something out. The Akan conception could be satisfied by non-human animals, rendering it too broad.

I argue that despite being broad, the Akan highlight a unique aspect of persons that is either taken for granted or simply denied. The idea of having biological parents is overlooked and rarely considered as part of any conception of a person. But it is a fact that all actual persons come from a woman and a man, so why is this left out? I also

question whether the Akan distinguish between humans and persons, or if they are in fact, for them, one and the same, which their conception seems to suggest.

I have responded to the question of what a person is by analyzing the Akan conception, but I certainly have not ended the conversation. Because the Akan have had minimal attention, my research only covers a slim portion of their view. I based my findings on what modest information was available, and I believe it provides sufficient support for claiming that these neglected groups should be included in the conversation. This raises larger questions about how African philosophy is being done today. Unfortunately, it seems that African philosophizing does not get very far beyond the continent or have remotely the same audience that many non-African philosophical works do.

Through performing cross-cultural philosophy, I have learned how many ideas there are that have yet to be discovered, and the difficulties it takes to find them. Resources for engaging with unfamiliar and non-Western thought are scarce. But this just means a different type of research is in order. I did not end up approaching this topic through a traditional perusal of well-known and readily organized sources, followed by reading, analysis, comparison, and evaluation. Instead, I was compelled to examine whatever sources I could find on the Akan people, interpreting their culture and thinking on that limited basis. Unfortunately, again, even history books were scarce. The key, however, is persistence and creativity. There are resources out there, and there are people who are interested in those smaller, neglected populations and ideas. Deep in databases and libraries, or one department or another in some college or another, there

is always something useful. It may not be as straight forward as doing Western research on Western authors as a Westerner, but I think it is clear that it is worth the challenge.

My thesis also leaves open the question of whether being the child of two persons is sufficient or necessary for being a person. I have introduced a new idea to the conversation, but it by no means concludes the debate.

Bibliography

- Agyekuma, Kofi [b1] (analytic). "The Ethnopragmatics of the Akan Palace Language of Ghana (English)." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 67.4 (0001): 573-593. FRANCIS. Web. 27 Apr. 2016.
- Andrews, Kristin, "Animal Cognition", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)
- Austin, Gareth. "'No Elders Were Present': Commoners and Private Ownership in Asante, 1807-96." *The Journal of African History* 1996: 1. JSTOR Journals. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.
- Austin, Michael W. "Rights and Obligations of Parents." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.d. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.
- Brake, Elizabeth and Millum, Joseph, "Parenthood and Procreation", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)
- Davidson, Basil, [1914-]. "Africa in History: Themes And Outlines." n.p.: Phoenix, 1992. *Africa-Wide Information*. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.
- Dvorsky, George. "No, India Did Not Just Grant Dolphins the Status of Humans." *io9*. Gawker Media, 15 Aug. 2013. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.
- Gallagher, James. "MPs Say Yes to Three-person Babies." *BBC News*. BBC, 3 Feb. 2015. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.
- Gyekye, Kwame. *An Essay On African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. n.p.: Cambridge; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1987., 1987. Print.

- Konadu, Kwasi. *The Akan Diaspora in The Americas*. n.p.: Oxford University Press, 2010. *Book Review Digest Plus (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. London: T. Tegg, 1841. Print.
- Lystad, Robert A. *The Ashanti; A Proud People*. n.p.: New York: Greenwood Press, 1968[c1958], 1968. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.
- Masolo, Dismas, "African Sage Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)
- Nam, Charles B. "The Concept of the Family: Demographic and Genealogical Perspectives." *Sociation Today*. The North Carolina Sociological Association, 2004. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.
- Olson, Eric T., "Personal Identity", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)
- Outlaw Jr., Lucius T., "Africana Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Web.
- Shutte, Augustine. *Philosophy for Africa*. n.p.: Milwaukee, Wisc.: Marquette University Press, 1995., 1995. Print.
- Theron, Stephen. *Africa, Philosophy, And The Western Tradition: An Essay In Self-Understanding*. n.p.: Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang, [1995], 1995. Print.
- Uzgalis, William, "John Locke", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)
- Warren, Dennis M. "The Akan of Ghana: An Overview of the Ethnographic Literature." n.p.: Pointer, 1986. *Africa-Wide Information*.
- Wilks, Ivor. *Forests Of Gold: Essays On The Akan And The Kingdom Of Asante*. n.p.: Athens: Ohio University Press, 1993., 1993. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.

Wingo, Ajume, "Akan Philosophy of the Person", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Indiana University Press: 1996.

Wiredu, Kwasi. "DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE IN AFRICAN CULTURE." *CHAPTER VII*. Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, n.d. Web. 26 Apr. 2016.

Wiredu, Kwasi. *The Concept of Mind with Particular Reference to the Language and Thought of the Akans*. From *Readings in African Philosophy*. Safro Kwame. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995. Print.

Wiredu, Kwasi (ed), William E (ed) Abraham, and Abiola (& others) Irele. *A Companion to African Philosophy: Blackwell Companions To Philosophy*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Philosopher's Index. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.