

# Becoming Human: An Emic Reconstruction of Traditional Luyia Personhood

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.36348/sjhss.2025.v10i11.003>

**Received:** 28.09.2025 | **Accepted:** 21.11.2025 | **Published:** 24.11.2025

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## Abstract

The Abhaluyia, Kenya's second-largest ethnic group, present an intriguing case for philosophical inquiry, particularly with regards to their conception of personhood – a notion that arguably lies at the heart of African philosophical thought. This emic study seeks to address a significant lacuna in scholarship by reconstructing the traditional Luyia understanding of personhood, prevalent from 1850 to 1910, prior to the profound influences of colonialism and missionary activity. This inquiry aims to illuminate the Abhaluyia's distinctive perspective on what it means to be human by examining their cultural beliefs and practices including proverbs, idioms, oral narratives, and rituals. The paper reveals that, at its core, the Luyia concept of personhood revolves around the essence of being human (*imero yo omundu*) seen as inextricably linked to the interdependent entities of the physical body (*omubhiri*), the inner self (*omwoyo*), and the posthumous liminal entity (*eshimakombe*). Within this framework, personhood is not simply a biological given, but rather a lifelong journey of cultivating one's innate capacities for knowledge and wisdom (*obhuchesi* or *obhunina*) and moral consciousness (*ebhima* or *emima*). Individuals strive to attain the revered status of dignified personhood (*oluyali*), which embodies the full actualization of human potential through socialization, experiential learning, and personal agency. This understanding of personhood acknowledges the interplay between genetic influences, human fallibility, and the communal, culturally particularistic context in which individuals develop.

**Keywords:** Luyia, dignified personhood, body, *omwoyo*, percipience, moral consciousness, liminal likeness.

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## INTRODUCTION

This inquiry seeks to reconstruct the idea of personhood prevalent among the Luyia people during the period of 1850 to 1910. Historiographical consensus suggests that by the mid-19th century, the Abhaluyia had established themselves in their current geographical locations, and despite the diverse origins of the various Luyia clans, they had coalesced into a distinct Bantu cultural entity by the latter half of the 19th century (Were, 1967). During this timeframe, although external influences such as Swahili and Arab traders, European explorers, missionaries, and administrators began to emerge, the majority of the Luyia population continued to adhere to traditional practices. This study focuses on the pre-colonial and pre-missionary cultural context, which represents the authentic traditional Luyia culture. Accordingly, the traditional Luyia concept of personhood refers to their understanding of personhood during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, prior to significant external influences.

The Luyia people are a Bantu ethnic group indigenous to Western Kenya who predominantly inhabit the counties of Kakamega, Busia, Bungoma, Vihiga, and Trans-Nzoia. They are organized into a complex system of totemic clans and larger clan clusters, including Abhawanga, Abhatirichi, Abhamarama, Abhashisa, Abhatsotso, Abhasamia, Abhamarachi, Abhatura, Abhakhayo, Abhanyala, Abhedakho, Abhesukha, Abhanyore, Abhanyala Bhekwe (Abhakabasi), Bhabhukusu, and Abhatachon. The Avalogoli are also considered part of the Luyia community. According to the 2019 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics census, the Luyia population accounts for approximately 14.4% (6.8 million) of Kenya's total population of 47.6 million, making them the second-largest ethnic group in the country. Despite their significant demographic presence, there is a paucity of scholarly research on the philosophical underpinnings of Abhaluyia cultural beliefs and practices, including their conceptualization of personhood.

A reconstruction of traditional African philosophy requires an exploration of the metaphysical beliefs and thoughts of African peoples, with particular attention to their cosmological frameworks and conceptions of personhood. This perspective is underscored by African philosophers such as Behrens (2013) and Masolo (2010), who advance the view that personhood constitutes a defining feature of African philosophical thought. While scholarly efforts have been made to elucidate traditional African conceptualizations of personhood in specific contexts, such as the Yoruba, Akan and Chewa communities of Africa, a comparable examination of the Luyia people's perception of personhood remains conspicuously absent. Moreover, scholars like Molefe (2020) contend that extant efforts have failed to provide sufficient conceptual clarity regarding African personhood, thereby underscoring the need for further theoretical explication. It is against this backdrop that this study undertakes an emic analysis of the traditional Luyia concept of personhood, drawing upon a rich array of cultural sources, including beliefs and practices, proverbial expressions, idiomatic language, and oral narratives. This methodology aligns with Appiah (2004), who posits that a community's conception of personhood cannot be inferred from their explicit propositional assertions, but rather must be discerned from the embodied patterns of their lived practices.

### Personhood as the essence of being human

A thorough examination of traditional Luyia beliefs and practices reveals a complicated understanding of the concept of a person, which is intricately linked to the idea of human nature. Conceptualized as human nature, personhood encompasses the complex array of ideas that define humanness, encompassing the ontogenetic processes that shape individuals and the distinctive attributes that confer uniqueness upon each person. This perspective is in consonance with Stetsenko (2013, p. 181) who defines personhood as 'the sets of ideas about what constitutes humanness, how people come to be the way they are, and what makes each person unique.' This perspective advances that persons are, fundamentally, human beings endowed with bodily existence and characteristic capacities inherent to their species.

Hence, the Luyia conceptualization of personhood is an attempt to articulate the essence of being human. This idea is encapsulated in the term '*imero yo omundu*' (what a human being or person is like in character and appearance). This refers to the distinctive characteristics, habits, and overall disposition that define an individual human being. Thus, in encountering an entity designated as a human being (*omundu*), the traditional Luyia perspective readily acknowledges its ontological reality, with the primary concern being the nature of humanity. According to Luyia ontology, personhood comprises two

interdependent constituents: the physical body (*omubhiri*) and the inner self (*omwoyo*) with its innate capacities. The interplay between these constitutive elements, particularly the capacities for percipience and moral sensitivity, plays a crucial role in the development of an individual from a mere biological being to a fully realized person.

### Personhood as being physiologically a human being

In this sense, personhood denotes the inherent fact of being a member of the human species by virtue of one's biological makeup. The Luyia linguistic tradition employs the term '*omundu*' (or '*mundu*') to signify both 'human being' and 'person,' which etymologically derives from the prefix '*omu-*' (human) and the root '*-ndu*' (existence), thereby underscoring the ontological reality of existing as a human entity. The Luyia distinguish the ontological category of *omundu* (person) from that of other entities (*efindu* or *ebhindu*), encompassing animals and inanimate objects. Congruent with other living organisms, human beings possess a corporeal dimension, referred to as '*omubhiri*' (body) in Luyia nomenclature. This bodily aspect includes both the external and internal constituents of human anatomy. The corporeal aspect of an individual serves as a salient marker for social identification. Furthermore, it confers an external aesthetic dimension, which is often subordinated to the intrinsic beauty associated with the notion of '*omwoyo*,' a concept that I will examine in the sequel.

By virtue of their shared physiological constitution, all human beings are endowed with personhood in the ontological sense. This categorization encompasses individuals with physical deformities (sin. *omulema*) and those afflicted with mental disorders (sin. *omulalu*), no matter the severity, who are equally recognized as persons. Furthermore, the unborn are regarded as human beings, with even those in the earliest stages of development being considered potentially human and, therefore, persons. This ontological framework underpins the Luyia's traditional proscription against abortion, which is viewed as a grave transgression.

According to Luyia cosmology, the genesis of humanity is attributed to the creative agency of the Supreme Being, referred to as *Were* (also *Wele*). *Were* is conceived as occupying a singular ontological category, eluding classification as *omuundu* (human being), *eshindu* (thing), or *abhundu* (place). His being is coterminous with transcendence, unbounded by the spatiotemporal continuum. As the primal cause, *Were* exists apart from the ontological plane of spirits, humans, and things, which owe their existence to his creative agency. The ascription of anthropomorphic attributes to *Were* serves merely as a heuristic device, an attempt to render the divine intelligible. He is often characterized as *Khakabha*, the giver, and commonly referred to as *Were Khakabha*, thereby underscoring his essential nature as

the bestower of being and sustenance. As the creator, *Were Khakabha* is described as *Omulonji* or *Omubhumbi*, terms derived from the verbs *khulonga* (to mould) and *khubhumba* (to shape), thereby signifying the divine moulder. *Were Khakabha* is attributed with the cosmogonic act of creating the inaugural human entities, thereby imbuing humanity with a celestial or cosmic essence.

In contrast to the primordial humans, who were fashioned by *Were*, subsequent generations are understood to arise from sexual reproduction (*olwibhulo*), with genetic contributions from parents and ancestors influencing one's physical attributes, health, and behavioral tendencies. This genetic influence underscores the importance of judicious spouse selection in Luyia culture, as the choice of partner is believed to impact the quality of offspring. Historically, it is customary to avoid marriage within the clan and with individuals from families afflicted by congenital defects, mental disabilities, or hereditary diseases. A British colonial officer, Hobley (1902), noted that the Luyia people were healthier than the other people he had encountered in East Africa, attributing this partly to their exogamous marriage arrangements and possibly dietary factors. Sayings such as 'A strong young man is one who feeds well' (*Omusiani wa lebhe nokhulia*) imply that the state of being well-fed constitutes a fundamental aspect of flourishing, and, by extension, robust personhood.

The human body (*omubhiri*) is ultimately subject to the inexorable fate of decomposition upon death, a universal phenomenon that awaits all mortals. This inevitability is underscored by sayings such as 'Death is the destiny of all' (*Elifwa niliabhosi*) and 'You can never tell the day of your death' (*Inyanga yofwa somanyanga tawe*), which attest to the inescapable nature of mortality. Upon cessation of life, the corporeal entity is reduced to a lifeless state, referred to as *omulambo* (corpse), whereas the dead as person is designated as *omufu* (the deceased). The corpse subsequently undergoes decomposition, leaving behind skeletal remains (*amakumba*), which themselves are susceptible to gradual disintegration over time. Cognizant of this sad end of the physical body, the Luyia who are not known to have extreme hedonistic tendencies as advocated for by the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristippus of Cyrene, are not opposed to modest feasting and merrymaking especially in times of plenty as echoed in the traditional song, which poignantly reminds us: 'This body will one day decay in the earth, so make merry while you live' (*Omubhiri kuno kulikona emakombe, sangasya omubhiri*).

### The concept of *omwoyo* and its role in personhood

The Luyia perception of personhood is rooted in the concept of *omwoyo*, a multifaceted concept that transcends its anatomical referent as the heart. As an organ of the body, *omwoyo* is specifically referred to as

*ikhupasi* or *mutima*, terms that denote the organ's function as a blood pumper. *Omwoyo* also denotes human voice. As a physical entity, *omwoyo* is not unique to humans, sharing similarities with other animals. However, our focus lies in the concept of *omwoyo*, which embodies the animating principle, conscious inner self, and personality. This inner essence encompasses the cognitive, emotional, moral, and spiritual facets of an individual, constituting the source of thoughts, feelings, and volitions. It is *omwoyo*, rather than the physical body, that confers a distinctive personality upon an individual, as will be elaborated upon in the sequel.

In Luyia ontology, *omwoyo* is conceptualized as a vital, animating force that instills consciousness and inner awareness within an individual, effectively serving as a life-giving principle. In this sense, *omwoyo* transcends its physical connotations, defying localization to a specific bodily organ. Rather, it can be understood as the most subtle and refined aspect of human functioning, subsuming cognitive, moral, emotional, and aesthetic sensitivities. The Luyia phrase '*Omwoyo kurulile*' (*Omwoyo* has left) aptly captures the notion that death marks the cessation of consciousness and sensitivity, underscoring the idea that *omwoyo* is not a tangible, physical entity. This conceptualization renders it implausible to equate *omwoyo* with a bodily organ, as the Luyia do not subscribe to the notion that the physical heart (which is also referred to as *omwoyo*) departs the body at death.

Other than being a life-animating principle, *Omwoyo* encompasses the dispositional aspects of an individual, subsuming cognitive, moral, and psychological capacities, as well as the qualities that characterize these capacities. As such, *omwoyo* serves as the locus and source of these dispositions, which are crucial for the attainment of the 'real person' (*omundu omwene*). The Luyia saying 'You cannot know the inner thoughts and feelings of a person' (*Kali mumwoyo kwomundu sonyala okhumanya tawe*) highlights the conception that *omwoyo* is the seat of inner thoughts and feelings. The inner thoughts of a person are not solely cognitive but also infused with affective dimensions.

Furthermore, *omwoyo* is seen as the origin of moral excellence, with individuals possessing a 'good *omwoyo*' (*omwoyo omulayi*) being morally upright and those with a 'bad *omwoyo*' (*omwoyo omubhi*) being morally deficient. The quality of one's *omwoyo* is thus seen as a determining factor in the attainment of full personhood, with a good *omwoyo* facilitating moral excellence actualizing the virtues associated with *obhundu* (the essence of being human) and a bad *omwoyo* diminishing one's personhood.

*Omwoyo* also serves as the origin of an individual's inner convictions, attitudes, emotions, and desires. This conceptualization is reflected in various

expressions, such as ‘*Omwoyo* desires’ (*Omwoyo kulenyanga*), ‘*Omwoyo* detests’ (*Omwoyo kulobhire*) and the saying ‘*Omwoyo* can long for what is not available’ (*Omwoyo kwikomba eshiumaho*), which suggests that *omwoyo* can desire or pine for that which is absent or unattainable underscoring its capacity for longing or yearning. These sayings and idiomatic expressions prove the view that *omwoyo* refers to the inner self, encompassing a person's subjective experiences, inclinations, and aversions.

A comparative analysis reveals that *omwoyo* exhibits functional similarities to the *okra* element of *onipa* (person) as a vital principle in the Akan people's conceptual framework, while also paralleling the *sunsum* element, which pertains to inner awareness. A key distinction that emerges between the Luyia and Akan conceptions of personhood is that the Luyia concept of *omwoyo* conflates the *okra* and *sunsum* elements, which are portrayed as distinct by Gyekye (1978) and Wiredu (1987, 1992) in the Akan schema. This divergence suggests a differential ontological articulation of personhood between the two cultures, with the Luyia conceptualization integrating aspects that are bifurcated in the Akan framework.

It is also crucial to distinguish the concept of *omwoyo* from the notion of the soul in certain religious traditions. Unlike the Judeo-Christian conception of the soul as a non-corporeal entity that persists beyond physical death, *omwoyo* is not an independently existing entity, but rather a supervenient phenomenon that is inextricably linked to the body, or *eshimakombe*, a liminal representation of the individual that will be examined in further detail later in this discussion. In this context, I infer that *omwoyo* ought to be construed as the most refined and sophisticated dimension of human functioning—a wavelike perceptual acuity emergent from the nervous and neural networks, encompassing the brain, which manifests in cognitive, moral, emotional, and aesthetic susceptibilities.

### **The role of percipience and moral capacity in defining Luyia personhood**

The preceding discussion has elucidated the ontological centrality of *omwoyo* within the Luyia conceptual framework, wherein it is conceptualized as the animating principle and conscious inner self that underlies personhood. It has been demonstrated that *omwoyo*'s centrality stems not only from its life-giving force, but more significantly, from its role as the source and origin of cognition, emotion, morality, and personality. These intrinsic capacities, which supervene upon *omwoyo*, are deemed essential for navigating the complexities of human existence, necessitating sound judgment, prudence, and moral acuity. Consequently, the Luyia regard the proper development of these capacities as a necessary condition for the attainment of full personhood, which transcends mere biological existence.

The present discussion will focus specifically on two cardinal capacities of *omwoyo*, the cultivation of which is deemed crucial for the realization of full personhood within the Luyia conceptual scheme: namely, the capacity for percipience and moral consciousness.

### **Personhood and the primacy of percipience**

The Luyia believe that *omwoyo* of a normal human being is endowed with an innate capacity for percipience, thereby enabling the individual to engage in rational cognition and deliberative decision-making processes. This capacity encompasses the ability to reason logically and arrive at sound conclusions, judgments, and choices in complex existential situations. Furthermore, percipience involves an intuitive faculty that facilitates discernment and understanding, allowing individuals to navigate their environment with insight and sagacity.

The Luyia language employs the terms *obhuchesi* or *obhunina* to denote the capacity for intelligence and wisdom. The acquired knowledge and wisdom is referred to as *amachesi*, derived from the verb *okhuchesiya* which signifies the process of becoming intelligent, wise, sensible, or rational. The Luyia concept of ‘*obhuchesi*’ refers to the ethical application of prudence, whereas ‘*obhuchesiyesi*’ denotes the unethical utilization of cunningness. In Luyia oral narratives, trickster figures utilize a tactical deployment of *obhuchesiyesi* (a calculated deceitful strategy) rather than *obhuchesi* (knowledge and wisdom), to facilitate their exploitation and subsequent outwitting of their dupes.

In contrast to *obhuchesi*, the term *omusiru* describes an individual who possesses intellectual potential but lacks relevant knowledge or practical wisdom in a specific context. This concept is exemplified in the way young children are often regarded as *abhasiru*, due to their nascent stage of cognitive development. The incipient rational faculty of the young is encapsulated in sayings such as *Okunoni okutoro kwatseshela ukwira* (The fledgling rejoiced upon the arrival of its impending slayer.), signifying that the youth, owing to their immature judgment, often err in their decisions, thereby exposing themselves to perilous situations. Similarly, the saying ‘*Womusinde yeile obhwobha akalukhao mbu obhundi bhumere*’ (The uninitiated frequents the place where he uprooted a mushroom) cautions that the uninitiated often repeat mistakes. As children mature, they are said to be undergoing a process of cognitive and moral refinement, termed *okhuchesiya*, connoting the development of intelligence and sensibility. This notion of rational and moral refinement is ritually instantiated in the initiation rite marking the transition from infancy to childhood, involving lower jaw teeth extraction for medical and aesthetic reasons, also termed *okhuchesiya*. After this rite, children about six years of age are segregated from



their parents' sleeping quarters, with boys residing in *esimba* and girls in *eshibhinze* (an elderly widowed grandmother's hut), where they receive didactic instruction and mentorship during evening sessions.

An individual exhibiting significant cognitive impairment, characterized by diminished rational faculties, is denoted by the term *omuyingwa*, which connotes a state of limited intellectual functioning. The *omuyingwa* embodies a less realized personhood, characterized by the limited cultivation of percipience – a faculty enabling discerning insight and moral deliberation in the complexities of existential situations. *Omuyingwa* differs from another term *omulalu* which refers to an individual who has suffered a profound loss of functional capacity, implying a more extensive compromise of their cognitive, moral and practical abilities. The *omulalu* is regarded as occupying a more primordial, biologically circumscribed existence, lacking the developed capacity for reflective agency and moral discernment.

In contrast to stereotypes claiming that Africans prioritize emotionality over rationality, the Luyia people place a high premium on perspicacity and practical wisdom in human life. That is why individuals who demonstrate exceptional prudence and sagacity are accorded respect and sought out for counsel. This emphasis on rationality is reinforced through various oral traditions, including oral narratives and proverbs which underscore the primacy of percipience in human life. For instance, oral narratives featuring trickster characters, such as the cunning ground squirrel (*Anakhamuna*), who successfully outwit more powerful adversaries like elephant (*Nanzofu*), serve to underscore the valorization of strategic thinking and intelligence in navigating the complexities of existential situations. Similarly, proverbs such as '*Omwana uchenda ashira nyina machesi*,' (A child who travels surpasses their mother's wisdom), emphasize the significance of experiential knowledge and intellectual curiosity in the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom. These didactic sayings collectively reinforce the importance of cognitive acuity and adaptive intelligence in Luyia cultural epistemology.

The Luyia exaltation of prudence is further demonstrated by their abhorrence of illogicality and fallacious reasoning, underscoring the importance of logical reasoning within the community. This is apparent in the numerous proverbs that censure incorrect reasoning and illogical inferences. Such proverbs include: *Wailola niikonile yatsia amakhono amakhaya* (The person who observed a leopard in repose approached it unarmed.), which cautions against temerity born of misjudgment, and '*Ulasiebha khwichina mbu khwichina oluya*' (The person who has never danced on a rain-slicked boulder presumes it to be warm), which highlights the indispensability of

experiential knowledge in dispelling misconceptions. Additional sayings, such as '*Amaruu katsekha amalala*' (Green banana leaves deride its dry counterparts.) and '*Lwakhunungo lwatsekha lwamumaika*' (A piece of firewood in a stack suspended above the hearth derides the one in the fire), serve as cautionary admonitions against *schadenfreude*, underscoring the impermanence of fortune and the inevitability of fate. These proverbs, alongside other oral traditions, function as didactic instruments, promoting rational thought, prudent decision-making, and a nuanced understanding of causality, thereby shaping the Luyia concept of rationality.

Riddles constitute an additional cognitive tool employed by the Luyia to cultivate rationality in young individuals. These riddles serve a dual purpose, functioning both as a form of entertainment and as a means of honing critical thinking and logical reasoning skills. Successfully resolving a riddle necessitates the deciphering of metaphorical language, the interpretation of symbolic imagery, and the application of logical inference. A classic example is the riddle: '*Eshindu shiwo shichendela ofulenje fune asubui, fubhiri mushitere, futaru angolobhe*' (That which walks on four limbs in the morning, two at midday, and three in the evening), which requires the solver to engage in abstract thinking and arrive at a solution through logical deduction. The solution, '*Omundu*', illustrates the various developmental stages of human life, thereby exemplifying the riddle's capacity to promote abstract thinking and logical reasoning.

The Luyia cultural privileging of cognitive faculties over physical prowess and emotional impulsivity serves to underscore the ontological primacy of reason in human existence, thereby instantiating a philosophical anthropology that positions rationality as the constitutive element of human beingness. This is reflected in sayings such as '*Amaani amanyishi kafunaka eshiolo*' (Excessive brawn breaks the knife), which cautions that unbridled physical power can be detrimental without the guidance of reason. Similarly, the aphorism '*Ameno namasiru katsekhangha kata mawo nafwire*' (Laughter is foolish; one can laugh even when the mother is dead) suggests that emotions must be subject to rational control, highlighting the importance of tempering emotional expression with prudence and decorum.

While the Luyia people highly value prudence and intellectual acuity, they also acknowledge the inherent limitations of human knowledge and skill acquisition. This realistic perspective is reflected in various aphorisms, such as '*Kata omuchesi achelelungwa*' (Even the clever one is advised), which underscores the importance of humility and the recognition that even the most knowledgeable individuals can benefit from guidance. Similarly, sayings

like '*Lekha obhe omuchesi, sochesiila obhurerere tawe*' (Regardless of one's cleverness, it is impossible to prevail over slipperiness) and '*Amatsi keranga omwelema*' (Even an expert swimmer can drown) caution against hubris and highlight the unpredictability of life. This epistemological modesty is consistent with the Luyia's satisficing approach to moral virtue, where the focus is on acquiring practical knowledge and skills that enable individuals to navigate the complexities of life effectively, rather than striving for absolute certainty or perfection.

### ***Moral consciousness as the essence of Luyia personhood***

In the Luyia philosophical framework, moral consciousness denotes a capacity for ethical perception and responsiveness, characterized by empathy, discernment, and humility in navigating the moral demands of communal existence. This concept can also be described as a 'capacity for virtue' (Molefe, 2021), highlighting the importance of cultivating moral excellence in interpersonal relationships and community life. Scholars such as Menkiti (2004) have also examined this concept as normative personhood.

In the Luyia language, the term for character is *ebhima* (also referred to as *emima*), which is considered the most valued aspect of personhood due to its role in defining an individual's inner self. This is evident in the Luyia expression '*Lebhe sali omundu tawe*,' which translates to 'So-and-so is not a person,' used to describe an individual whose character fails to meet societal expectations. Character, in this context, is contingent upon *omwoyo*, the conscious inner self, from which it originates. Hence, a person's character encompasses their thoughts, words, attitudes and actions, which are seen as authentic reflections of their inner dispositions.

The Luyia people make a distinction between good character (*ebhima ebhilayi* or *emima emilayi*) and bad character (*ebhima ebhibhi* or *emima emibhi*), a dichotomy that is rooted in the dispositional functioning of the *omwoyo*. According to this categorization, the *omwoyo's* operational orientation determines an individual's behavior, inclining them towards either virtuous or malevolent actions. Specifically, good character is seen as an outward expression of a well-disposed *omwoyo*, whereas bad character is understood to emanate from a poorly disposed *omwoyo*. The manifestation of these dispositions is observable in an individual's thoughts, desires, intentions, words, and actions, which serve as indicators of the quality of their *omwoyo*.

In Luyia ethical thought, the highest good in human life is life embodied in the concept of '*oluyali*,' which encompasses moral integrity, dignity, honor, good reputation, and respectworthiness. According to this ethical framework, every individual strives to attain a

status of honor and esteem within their respective social contexts. Specifically, men aspire to achieve the status of '*omwami*,' a respected elder of unimpeachable character, while women strive to be recognized as '*omukhaye*,' a dignified and respected wife distinguished by her moral integrity. Accordingly, the Luyia highly prize the values associated with the esteemed status of *oluyali* such as generosity, prudence, sociability, diligence, sincerity, and temperance. The Luyia cultural lexicon is replete with sayings that extol the virtues of moderation and temperance. Illustrative examples include: 'The hasty eater burns their teeth; the one who waits for their dish to cool shares with guests' (*Yuyukhana yayia ameno; linda-finyere yalia nabhacheni*), cautioning against haste and imprudence; 'The slow walker reaches the far West' (*Chenda-kalaha yola Mumbo*), underscoring the importance of perseverance and deliberation; and 'The wise person takes to the dance floor only once' (*Omulayi ashina mumuse lulala*), advising against excess and immoderation. The internalization and practical application of these values are deemed essential to the realization of personhood, highlighting the significance of ethical conduct in Luyia cultural ontology.

The Luyia perspective recognizes that moral perfection is an unattainable ideal, even for individuals of noble character (*oluyali*). Instead, they acknowledge that human beings are complex and multifaceted, exhibiting a mix of virtues and flaws. This complex understanding of character is reflected in sayings such as '*Noruna inyende mubhwobha solia obhwobha tawe*' (Searching maggots in every mushroom leaves none to eat). and '*Omulayi shiabulunga imbala tawe*' (Even the pretty one is not without an ugly scar). These sayings suggest that a morally good person is one who consistently demonstrates good character most of the time, rather than achieving an unattainable standard of perfection. This approach to moral excellence can be described as a form of satisficing, where individuals strive for a high level of moral goodness without expecting to achieve absolute perfection.

The Luyia also hold the view that discerning an individual's authentic character is a complex endeavor, as their outward actions or words may not necessarily reflect their inner disposition. This conception of character is reflected in various proverbs that highlight the human capacity for duplicity and pretence. For instance, the saying '*Omulayi omulinda munzala*' (A person's good character comes out in lean times) suggests that an individual's true nature is often revealed in times of adversity or hardship, implying that their character is tested and validated during challenging circumstances. This proverb underscores the Luyia awareness of the complexities of human nature and the potential for individuals to conceal their true character, highlights the difficulties inherent in accurately gauging a person's true nature.

The Luyia believe that although typical human beings possess an inherent potential for moral virtue, the particular values that constitute personhood are not universally applicable to all people across diverse populations. Accordingly, they adopt a non-interventionist approach to moral proselytization, refraining from imposing their ethical norms on other members of the broader society and beyond. This stance is rooted in a particularistic or relativist moral ontology, wherein the norms and expectations governing personhood are understood to be specific to particular clans, clusters of clans, or local communities. This ethical perspective, which acknowledges the diversity of moral values and practices across different groups, may have been informed by the Luyia's historical interactions with neighboring communities, such as the Kalenjin, Maasai, Luo, and Iteso, which likely fostered an awareness of the variability of moral norms and practices across cultures. This contextual specificity of moral frameworks, suggests that the realization of personhood is contingent upon the internalization and enactment of culture-specific values and norms.

According to Luyia thought, the capacity for moral consciousness is an innate faculty that is partially influenced by genetic factors, yet its full actualization necessitates a synergistic interplay of socialization, education and individual effort. The Luyia recognize a biological dimension to moral development, positing that certain behavioral patterns may be inherited from ancestors, as reflected in their judicious approach to spouse selection, wherein they eschew unions with families exhibiting egregious behavioral anomalies, such as nocturnal aberrance or witchcraft. This notion of genetic determinism is further encapsulated in sayings such as: '*Imbwa ilondaa omusokonyolo kwa nyina*' (A puppy squats like its mother), '*Eshiminywi shilondaa mmkhwesi*' (A chick follows its mother's tracks), and '*Omwana welikhanga nelikhanga*' (The chick of a guinea-fowl is a guinea-fowl), collectively suggesting that genetic predispositions contribute to the shaping of behavioral tendencies.

The acknowledgement of genetic factor in determining an individual's character does not preclude the role of societal and individual efforts in cultivation of good character. The innate human capacity for moral excellence is nurtured and refined through a tripartite process of pedagogical instruction, sociocultural enculturation, and experiential engagement, thereby facilitating the actualization of virtue. The sayings: '*Omusaala omulayi kukhulira muchindi*' (A good tree grows among others) underscores the role of socialization and education in shaping an individual's character. The Luyia believe that a person's character is shaped during their formative years, a perspective that is succinctly captured in the proverb '*Shinga olwa omwana alelwa nolwa akhula*' (The child grows up in the way they are brought up). This idea is further reinforced by

metaphorical sayings, such as '*Omusaala kukololosibungwa nikushiri omutoro*,' (A tree is straightened when it is still young), and '*Inula irulanga bhutoro*' (Good health or character begins from childhood). Additionally, sayings like '*Inyende indala ibhosiaa obhwobha bhwosi*' (One maggot rots all the mushrooms), '*Nochenda nende shikanda nokanda*' (If you walk with an idler, you may become an idler), and '*Nochenda nomwifi wakhebhe*' (If you walk with a thief, you may become a thief yourself) imply that socialization and peer influence can also impact one's character. These sayings collectively underscore the significance of early life socialization, education and experiences in shaping an individual's character.

Although the Luyia acknowledge the influence of genetic and environmental factors on moral behavior, ultimately, they hold that individuals are the primary agents of their own moral development and actions through the operation of *omwoyo*. This inherent uniqueness underscores the notion of individual responsibility, as no two persons, including identical twins, share an identical personality profile. The Luyia aphorisms '*Inda yebhula Mukhoolo niyo yebhula Mukusa*' (The womb that bore Mukhoolo is the same one that bore Mukusa) and '*Inda inolwakho*' (The womb has chambers) or '*Kata amakhwana mulisombo kakabhukhana*' (Even twins in the womb have a membrane separating them) suggest that individual differences are not reducible to shared genetic or environmental factors. Furthermore, the saying '*Injira shiibholelanga ouchenda*' (The path does not fore-warn the traveler) implies that individuals are responsible for their choices and actions, and that moral agency is not always predetermined. This is also underscored by the saying: 'He who dies of overeating will not haunt those left behind' (*Oufwa india sashiena tawe*), which suggests that even in death, an individual retains responsibility for their actions. Ultimately, individual agency, facilitated by the operation of *omwoyo*, is the primary driver of one's moral development and goodness.

This view is also reinforced by sayings that suggest that even good counsel and corrective measures may be ineffective in altering the trajectory of an individual's behavior if they are resolute in their actions. For instance, the proverbs '*Yenya okhubhola siulilaa omuliro tawe*' (Meat that will rot defies desiccation) and '*Itsia okhutubha siulilaa etsindi nitsiana tawe*' (A cow that will stray does not hear the call of others) imply that an individual's propensity for good or bad behavior is ultimately determined by their own character, underscoring the notion that personal agency and *omwoyo* are the primary factors in shaping one's moral destiny. This saying, among others, collectively repudiates the notion of biological determinism as a legitimizing excuse for one's comportment, instead emphasizing the primacy of personal agency and

accountability. In this view, an individual's existential choices are seen as bearing inherent consequences, which persist beyond the threshold of mortality, thereby underscoring the importance of moral self-awareness and answerability.

The development of good character, a prerequisite for achieving full personhood, is a gradual and lifelong process that spans from infancy to old age. That is why the Luyia cultural schema associates moral immaturity with young age and moral excellence with advanced age, which is why the elderly are accorded great respect. The moral immaturity of the young corresponds to their cognitive immaturity which predisposes them to make wrong moral decisions and judgments. This is captured in sayings such as '*Amabheyesanio komusimba*' (Deception abounds in young men's minds), and '*Oluya lwangolobhe lwakonia omusinde indulo*' (The warmth at dusk made a young man sleep in the cold). The reverence of elders is manifest in various funeral rituals, such as the *eshilemba* or *okhuwuyia* cattle-drive ceremony, staged by clans like Abhashitsetse, Abhashu, Bhalunda, Abhakhibhe, and Abhatere to honor a respected elder (*omwami*). During these ceremonies, the remains of elders are often interred in a sitting position of dignity, and songs like '*Khusaye omwami*' (Let us honor our departed elder) are sung. This honorific treatment is reserved for elders who are deemed to have attained full personhood, underscoring the cultural significance of cognitive and moral maturity.

While normal individuals are generally moral agents, the Luyia acknowledge that certain individuals may lack the capacity for moral agency, thereby exempting them from full moral responsibility. This category includes infants with nascent but undeveloped moral faculties, individuals with severe mental impairments (sin. *omulalu*) that compromise their capacity for rational thought and moral virtue, and those under the influence of external forces such as spells. These individuals are seen as operating outside the domain of moral accountability, which precludes moral autonomy and agency of the actor. Consequently, it is unrealistic to anticipate such individuals to attain a substantial approximation of normative personhood.

The Luyia subscribe to the view that character formation is fixed at the point of death, with an individual's moral trajectory during life determining their post-mortem status. Adults and elders who die after attaining fully developed personhood are generally believed to transition into benevolent ancestors save when they are angered by the living members of the family while those with bad character become malevolent ancestors. Benevolent ancestors have the power to influence the future, to bring good fortune and protect living relatives and future generations if they are periodically remembered through being named after and symbolically given gifts and offerings. Conversely,

individuals who pass away in infancy or childhood, prior to attaining full personhood, are not typically venerated or memorialized through naming practices. Their occasional apparitions to the living are often interpreted as mischievous, underscoring their ambiguous status within the ontological framework. The belief in an afterlife entity is subjected to cursory examination in the subsequent discussion.

The Luyia people understand that being a full person is fragile and can end easily due to life's ups and downs. Things like sickness, old age, or injury can take away a person's ability to think, choose, and act for themselves, leaving only the body behind. When someone loses this inner spark, they are no longer the same active, aware person they used to be. Their actions can't be judged as right or wrong because they are no longer in control. That's why, during a funeral speech (*obhuloli*), the Luyia don't talk about the weak or confused state at the end. Instead, they remember the strong, independent person who lived with purpose. This shows that true personhood depends on being able to direct your own thoughts, feelings, and actions. When this capacity is eroded, we are left with a shadow of the person who once was, a mere simulacrum of their former self. The eulogy (*obhuloli*), then, becomes a testament to the enduring power of personhood, a celebration of the life that was lived, and the agency that was once exercised.

### **The relationship between the body, *omwoyo* and *eshimakombe***

As already noted, the Luyia believe that upon the dissolution of the corporeal body, a liminal entity, *eshimakombe*, persists, undergoing a transition to the transcendent realm of *emakombe*, the ancestral domain. This realm is conceived as existing beyond the mortal world, with the *eshimakombe* inhabiting an ethereal underworld, as evoked by phrases such as '*sheilobha*,' denoting a being of the underworld. The term *omusambwa* is occasionally invoked to signify an ancestral presence, although it more precisely connotes a potent ancestral force emanating from the *eshimakombe*, which may compel a living individual to assume a vocation or art associated with the deceased, such as blacksmithing or keeping implements associated with the dead. In Luyia cultural context, the phrase '*Misambwa chyabhakuka*' denotes the invocation of a profound ancestral potency, whereas '*Omusambwa kukhaire*' signifies the tangible manifestation of this potency, often accompanied by portentous signs such as tremors or illness, which serves as a catalyst for an individual to assume a vocation, be it coveted or otherwise. This phenomenon underscores the profound and abiding impact of ancestral agency upon the mortal realm.

The Luyia people's conceptualization of the liminal entity diverges from that of the Chewa, who perceive the persistence of a shadowy entity (Kagame,



1989). In contrast, the Luyia perceive *eshimakombe* as a transfigured being that preserves the deceased individual's physical and personality characteristics. The term '*eshimakombe*' can be etymologically deciphered as denoting an inhabitant of the underworld and not a shadow, which in Luyia language is known as *eshininikha*. This liminal being is conceptualized as possessing a quasi-corporeal likeness of the departed person, a characteristic ascribed to the transfiguration of the physical body, thereby rendering them more puissant than the living. This elucidates the rationale for designating a dead body, stripped of personhood, as *omulambo*. As a transfigured entity, *eshimakombe* is believed to manifest in a manner approximating its former physical appearance, often communicating through a possessed individual in a trance state, thus enabling the living to recognize the voice and presence of the deceased. Through this mediumistic process, a ritual specialist engages in dialogue with the *eshimakombe* (or *omusambwa*) to discern their wishes or grievances. This dynamic is encapsulated in the saying: '*Omusambwa kwenya okhulia kwilomanga*,' (The ancestor that desires sustenance makes its needs known). Ritual practices, including libation and food offerings, attest to the belief that ancestors possess a quasi-physical nature, underscoring the Luyia understanding of the *eshimakombe* as a liminal entity retaining aspects of corporeality.

With regards to personality similitude, the *eshimakombe* is conceptualized as undergoing a transition to the ancestral realm while preserving the distinctive personality traits and characteristics that defined the individual during their mortal existence. For example, if the deceased person was known for their obstinacy, their *eshimakombe* may manifest as a malevolent entity that haunts the living, referred to as *eshishieno*, derived from the verb *okhushiena* (to haunt). In response to such occurrences, the affected individuals may resort to a ritualistic practice involving the incineration of the deceased's remains, followed by the dispersal of the ashes in a rapidly flowing river. This symbolic act is intended to facilitate the *eshimakombe*'s transition to the ancestral realm, effectively confining it and preventing further disturbances to the living. The basis of this ritual is the belief that a haunting *eshimakombe* may be still hovering around the remains of the dead and not transitioned to the underworld, hence the exorcism.

Ontologically, it is inconceivable that *eshimakombe*, as a transfigured entity retaining the personality of the individual, can preexist the person or coexist as an inherent aspect of a living person's nature, akin to the soul or spirit in certain traditions. Rather, *eshimakombe* emerges as a transfigurative manifestation of the deceased person, consequent upon the demise of the physical body, thereby terminating further organismic and personality development. Personality

development is contingent upon *omwoyo*, which supervenes on the biological person; thus, the cessation of bodily functions precipitates the arrest of personal growth. Consequently, the reverence accorded to ancestors is predicated on their age and social standing at the time of death. Elders, having attained full personhood, are accorded greater respect during funeral rites and ancestorhood. Certain clans, such as the Abhashu, Bhalunda, Abhakhibhe, and Abhatere, perform a ritualistic cattle-drive ceremony, *eshilemba* or *okhuwuyia*, to honor deceased elders, facilitating the transition of *eshimakombe* to the ancestral realm and ensuring a successful passage to the afterlife.

### **Towards a Luyia concept of dignified personhood**

In the Luyia philosophical tradition, the concept of dignified personhood encapsulated in the term *omundu woluyali* (a dignified person) represents the pinnacle of human realization. The concept transcends mere biological existence as *omundu* (human being) to embody moral integrity, honor, dignity, good reputation, and respectworthiness within the communal setting. Every normal human being aspires to achieve this dignified status (*oluyali*) in the community which for men is known as *obhwami* (respected eldership) and for women is *olukhaaye* (respected, dignified womanhood).

Dignified personhood (*omundu woluyali*) is not an innate endowment granted at birth by the Supreme Being, *Were Khakabha* ((the divine moulder and giver) but an achieved status, earned through the lifelong cultivation and harmonious interplay of the physical body (*omubhiri*) and the inner self (*omwoyo*), which serves as the animating principle, seat of consciousness, cognition, emotion, and moral dispositions. This dignified state emerges when an individual's *omwoyo omulayi* (good inner self) consistently manifests in virtuous thoughts, words, attitudes, and actions, aligning with communal values and fostering relational harmony. That is why even among the Wanga for whom kingship (*Nabhongo*) is hereditary, still the integrity of sons of a departed king was considered in nominating the heir to the kingship. Being a son to a king was not enough to be the heir apparent, you had to demonstrate qualities associated with *oluyali* including moral integrity and bravery.

At its core, *oluyali* presupposes the ontological foundation of personhood: the corporeal form shaped by the Supreme Being, *Were Khakabha*, combined with *omwoyo* as the vital force that instills awareness and sensitivity. Yet dignity demands more than physiological humanity or basic animation; it requires the actualization of innate capacities supervening on *omwoyo*, particularly percipience (*obhuchesi* or *obhunina*) and moral consciousness (*ebhima* or *emima*). Percipience enables prudent judgment, logical reasoning, and adaptive intelligence. Moral consciousness, the capacity for virtue, orients the individual toward empathy,

generosity, diligence, sincerity, temperance, and sociability, countering vices through a good *omwoyo* that inclines toward excellence rather than deficiency.

The concept of *oluyali* is profoundly relational and contextual, deriving meaning from African communalism. The Luyia people perceive human beings as social entities by both nature and necessity a view encapsulated in the allegorical tale of *The Elephant and the Bush* summarized proverbially as follows:

*'Inzofu ibholeraa eshitsakha yiri ndakhulinda eshitsakha nasho shibholera inzofu shiri ndakhulinda.'* (The mighty elephant boasts to the humble bush, proclaiming, 'I safeguard you,' to which the bush retorts, 'No, it's I who truly safeguards your life.').

This tale underscores the interdependent nature of relationships. The narrative illustrates that individuals are embedded within a web of social relationships, wherein mutual protection and safeguarding are paramount in a communal setting. The Luyia's understanding of personhood is thus predicated on the notion that individuals are social by nature and necessity, and that their existence is inextricably linked to their community. This is reflected in proverbs such as *'Omundu menya ninaye'* (A person is known by living with them) and *'Oulamenya nachina mbu china oluya'* (One who hasn't coexisted with a stone thinks it is warm), which emphasize the communal dimension of personhood. The attainment of *Oluyali*, or dignified personhood, is therefore a collective assessment, evaluated in reference to societal criteria and in comparison, with others within the social context. This implies that although personhood, is to a large extent, an individual achievement, and the status is conferred upon an individual by their community, and is accessible to all normal human beings within their various social stations.

The Luyia believe that true dignity reveals itself in adversity as expressed in the saying *'Omulayi omulinda munzala'* (Good character emerges in lean times) and through consistent enactment of virtues, not perfection, as humans are multifaceted with flaws as captured in the saying *'Noruna inyende mubhwobha solia obhwobha tawe'* (Seeking maggots in every mushroom leaves none to eat). Thus they are alive to the complexity of human nature including their capacity for duplicity and satisficing nature of their epistemological and moral capacities.

Dignified personhood matures gradually, that is why moral excellence and ethical use of percipience is often associated with age. This explains why the Luyia perform cattle-drive rituals known as *eshilemba* or *okhuwuyia* to grant some elders posthumous honor as benevolent ancestors (sin. *eshimakombe* or *omusambwa*). Those who die young and those who fail to attain the status of *oluyali* through bad *omwoyo*,

immorality, or impaired capacities (e.g., sin. *omuyingwa* and *omulalu*) which diminishes their personhood are regarded as malevolent thus customarily excluded from veneration. Thus, dignified personhood (*oluyali*) is the ethical telos of Luyia ontology. A dignified person (*omundu woluyali*) is one whose inner excellence radiates outward, sustaining community, earning esteem, and ensuring transcendent legacy, affirming that full humanness is not merely to exist, but to live virtuously and with sagacity among others.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to reconstruct the traditional Luyia concept of personhood prevalent from 1850 to 1910 before significant colonial and Christian missionary impact. The paper has elucidated the complex and multifaceted nature of personhood from an emic perspective, drawing on the cultural and philosophical traditions of the Luyia Bantu community in Kenya. The Luyia concept of personhood is characterized by a rich ontological framework, intricately linked to their perception of human nature, encapsulated in the concept of *'imero yo omundu.'* It is a holistic ontology centered on the interdependence of the physical body (*omubhiri*), the conscious animating inner self (*omwoyo*) as the source of cognition, emotion, morality, and personality that define an individual., and the posthumous liminal entity (*eshimakombe* or *omusambwa*) the liminal aspect that preserves individual traits in the ancestral realm. Far from a static biological given, personhood emerges as a dynamic process requiring the cultivation of innate capacities for percipience (*obhuchesi*) and moral consciousness (*ebhima* or *emima*), nurtured through socialization, experiential learning, and personal agency within a communalist framework, while acknowledging genetic influences, human fallibility, and cultural particularism. The apotheosis of human development is the acquisition of the esteemed status of *oluyali*, denoting the culmination of human potentiality. This coveted status represents the zenith of human flourishing, wherein individuals realize their fullest potential. For men, this entails striving to become revered elders (sin. *omwami*), leaving an enduring legacy that transcends mortality, whereas women aspire to embody the archetype of *omukhaye*, a paragon of dignity, virtue, and exemplary character.

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