

Exploring the Production of Knowledge on Africa through the Concept of ‘Personhood’

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African ‘personhood’ has often been implicitly or explicitly opposed to the European/western ‘individual’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001), a dualistic perspective opposing a relational, communalistic, inert self attributed to Africans as ‘pre-modern others’ on one hand, and the self-made, self-conscious, ‘individual’ of ‘modern western society’ on the other. The first part of the paper will tackle issues raised by this opposition as well as by its corollaries – like: individual/society, personhood/individual/self – in some classical anthropological works. The main purpose will be to clarify the analytical distinctions and the epistemological issues raised by the study of ‘African personhood’. In the second part, I will suggest ways of speaking of the African personhood without falling into the trap of ‘exoticism’ or absolute relativism. To achieve this I will draw – as paradoxical as it may seem – on Melanesian and Indian ethnography (Busby, Dumont, Gell, LiPuma, Strathern). I will provide a ‘Melanesian analysis’ of ethnographic data collected in the Cameroon Grassfields and explore if, and to what extent one can conceptually bridge the ‘European autonomous person’ and the ‘African concept of the person’.

