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A Critical Examination of *Ochelamu*: The Concept of the Human Person from an Idoma Perspective

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[1]Abstract

This article repositions *Ochelamu*, the Idoma concept of the human person, as more than an indigenous theory of human composition. Rather than asking only what the Idoma person is made of, it asks how the idea of the person works: how it classifies bodies, assigns responsibility, sustains kinship, authorizes memory, and exposes vulnerable lives to judgment. Drawing on interviews conducted in Adoka in 2019, we argue that *Ochelamu* operates as a social technology of recognition. Its constituent elements do not merely name metaphysical parts; they regulate who becomes legible as honorable, dangerous, responsible, diminished, remembered, or ritually significant. The article's central contribution is to show that Idoma personhood is ethically ambivalent: the same grammar that sacralizes life and sustains communal obligation can also moralize illness, gender blame, infertility, disability, aging, and widowhood. By shifting from ontology to the politics of recognition, the study challenges romantic accounts of African relationality and offers a critical framework for understanding how African concepts of the human become practical instruments of care, accusation, hierarchy, and repair.

Keywords:

Ochelamu, Idoma, Personhood, African Philosophy, Relational Personhood, Social Recognition, Moral Responsibility, Ancestral Memory, Vulnerability, Dignity, Widowhood, Death and Afterlife, African Indigenous Spirituality, Ontology and Social Power

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Introduction: *Ochelamu* and the Meaning of the Human in Idoma Thought

What does it mean to be human in Idoma thought? This question has often been answered by listing the elements believed to constitute the person: body, life, breath, blood, spirit, mind, shadow, ancestry, and moral consciousness. Such descriptions are valuable, but they do not go far enough. They tell us what a person is said to consist of, yet they tell us less about what the idea of the person does within lived society. A concept of the human person is never only descriptive. It also shapes how communities interpret dignity, obligation, illness, moral failure, kinship responsibility, death, inheritance, and belonging. This article argues that *Ochelamu*, the Idoma concept of the human person, is best understood not merely as an ontology of human composition but as a practical grammar through which life is valued, judged, protected, contested, and remembered.

The significance of this claim extends beyond Idoma studies. Across African philosophy and religious studies, debates on personhood have frequently turned on familiar questions: Is the self primarily communal or individual? Does the person survive bodily death? Is personhood given at birth or gradually achieved through moral excellence? Are invisible dimensions of the self-reducible to symbolic language or do they name genuine metaphysical realities? These questions have produced an important body of scholarship, yet they can also narrow inquiry when they treat personhood as an abstract problem detached from ordinary life. Human beings do not encounter personhood only in philosophical argument. They encounter it in birth celebrations, marriage negotiations, illness narratives, inheritance disputes, elder authority, accusations, funerals, mourning, memory, and indeed in the everyday practices through which social being is formed and recognized. The meaning of the person is often disclosed most clearly in the places where life becomes fragile.

The Idoma case is especially illuminating because personhood is articulated through a rich network of categories that bind visible and invisible existence together. *Oyeyi* names life not merely as biological survival but as sacred vitality. *Okpiye* refers to the body as the visible bearer of presence, labor, aging, and suffering. *Alekwu* designates spirit and ancestral continuity, linking the living with those who have died. *Owu* names breath as the fragile sign of animation. *Oyie* points to blood as life-force, kinship bond, and moral seriousness. *Odo* concerns mind, conscience, intention, and moral discernment. *Ojiji*, shadow, suggests that the person exceeds what can be grasped in purely material terms. Taken together, these elements do more than describe a human being. They organize a world in which the person is understood as embodied, relational, accountable, vulnerable, and spiritually situated.

This article therefore resists two common tendencies. The first is the reduction of African concepts to ethnographic curiosities, as though they were interesting beliefs rather than serious reflections on the human condition. The second is the temptation to translate indigenous categories too quickly into familiar Western terms such as body, soul, psyche, or religion. To call *Alekwu* simply “soul” or “spirit,” for example, risks flattening its moral, ancestral, and communal dimensions. To describe *Ojiji* merely as shadow misses the ways it participates in a broader understanding of presence, visibility, and spiritual significance. Idoma categories should be interpreted carefully, with attention to their own conceptual logic before they are absorbed into inherited philosophical vocabularies.

The Idomas offer a particularly rich case for such inquiry. As one of the major ethnolinguistic groups of central Nigeria, Idomas constitute the second largest ethnic community in Benue State after the Tiv. They are concentrated largely in southern Benue, especially in Otukpo, Ado, Agatu, Apa, Obi, Oju, Ohimini, Okpokwu, and Ogbadibo, while substantial communities also live beyond the region through migration and trade. Although often spoken of collectively, the Idomas are internally diverse, marked by dialect differences, local histories, and varying ritual traditions (Oduma-Aboh 2015, 2). This diversity matters because *Ochelamu* cannot be treated as a fixed formula expressed identically across all Idoma communities. It is a living category, shaped by locality, Christianity, kinship systems, migration, generational change, and everyday negotiation.

Methodologically, our analysis combines conceptual interpretation with qualitative interview-based research conducted among Idoma interlocutors in Adoka in 2019. Because Adoka is geographically expansive and the study was conducted under financial constraints, the research was concentrated in three areas: Adoka-Icho (Ai-Ode), Adoka-Ehaje (Ai-Enyikwole), and Adoka-Nenche (Entepka). The study draws on interviews with twenty-two interlocutors, all of whom had attained education beyond the primary school level. Seventeen participants were men and five were women, with an average age of approximately thirty years.

Precisely because our interlocutors describe *Ochelamu* as both a theory of human composition and a way of interpreting social conduct, the concept opens directly onto broader debates about dignity and social recognition. A concept of personhood can sustain care, mutual responsibility, reverence for life, and continuity with the dead. Yet the same concept can also become a means of exclusion when certain persons are judged deficient, dangerous, burdensome, barren, impure, dishonorable, or socially incomplete. Widows, the childless, disabled persons, the poor, and those experiencing illness or mental distress may encounter personhood not as affirmation but as precarious recognition. The study of personhood must therefore ask not only how a society defines the human, but how that definition becomes unevenly applied across bodies, statuses, and social conditions.

To develop this argument, the article proceeds in three movements. First, we examine *Ochelamu* as a philosophical account of the human person, paying close attention to its constitutive categories and relational logic. Second, we consider how personhood functions as a framework of moral regulation and social recognition in everyday Idoma life. Third, we turn to vulnerability, crisis, aging, illness, and death in order to show how the meaning of personhood is tested where life is most exposed. In doing so, the article argues that Idoma thought offers an important resource for rethinking the human person not as an isolated individual or a passive metaphysical substance, but as a being formed through embodiment, relation, moral responsibility, memory, and the unseen dimensions of life.

***Ochelamu* as Ontology and Social Grammar**

If *Ochelamu* is to be understood as more than a catalogue of human components, then its first task is to clarify how Idoma thought imagines the person as a complex unity. The Idoma concept of the human person begins from the recognition that the person is not a simple or self-contained entity. *Ochelamu* names a being constituted through life, body, spirit, breath, blood, mind, and shadow. These elements are not detachable fragments arranged beside one another like objects in a basket. They are interwoven dimensions of one living person. The body gives visible form;

breath animates; blood carries life and kinship; mind reflects, chooses, remembers, and warns; shadow accompanies and signifies; spirit links the person to God, ancestry, memory, and the unseen world. The person is therefore not a sealed container of consciousness but a field of relations. To speak of *Ochelamu* is to speak of a human being whose life stretches through flesh and breath, household and lineage, moral conduct and ancestral memory.

This point is important because it prevents Idoma personhood from being read merely as a metaphysical inventory. The question is not only what the person is made of, but how these dimensions of the person organize meaning in social life. In this sense, *Ochelamu* functions as both ontology and social grammar. It describes the constitution of the human person, but it also teaches how the person is interpreted, evaluated, protected, and remembered. The account of philosophical anthropology offered by legal scholar Pamela Andanda and philosopher Marcus Düwell is useful here because it shows that ethical reflection cannot be separated from broader questions about human nature and shared social life, including "the individual, society, biology, and culture" (Andanda and Düwell 2024, 2, 8; page numbers are based on manual numbering because they are not indicated in the online version). *Ochelamu* belongs precisely to this terrain. It is an Idoma account of the human condition, but it is also a framework through which social life becomes intelligible.

Oyeyi, life, is foundational. In Idoma thought, life does not merely mean biological survival. It also refers to one's reason for existing, one's orientation toward the world, one's moral disposition, and one's mode of social interaction. Life is sacred because it comes from God (Owoicho). For this reason, murder, suicide, and contempt for human life are deeply condemned. Yet the sacredness of life also carries social implications. It means that the weak, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, the child, or the socially disadvantaged cannot be dismissed as worthless. Even though, in practice, as in many African settings, this affirmation is not always consistently honored, the tension does not simply arise from hypocrisy. It emerges from the difficulty of determining how sacred life is to be recognized when the human person appears through conditions that a community may fear, misunderstand, or devalue: disability, poverty, infertility, mental distress, old age, dependence, or social failure. The problem, then, is not only whether Idoma thought affirms that life is sacred; it is how that sacredness is socially confirmed when a person does not fit dominant expectations of strength, productivity, fertility, moral composure, or communal usefulness. Our interlocutors expressed this conviction through stories and warnings against ridicule: poverty, bodily limitation, dependence, or social failure may alter how a person is perceived, but they do not cancel the sacred origin of life in *Owoicho*.

The Ghanaian postcolonial theologian Emmanuel Y. Lartey clarifies this point through his account of African spirituality. He argues that, in many African contexts, "all of life is sacred" and that spirituality is "the central organizing aspect of the human personality" (Lartey 2020, 17–8). This is useful for understanding *Oyeyi*. Life is not secular biology to which religion is later added. Life is already spiritually charged. The person does not first exist as a biological organism and then acquire social or spiritual meaning. Rather, life arrives already held within a network of divine, familial, moral, and communal significance. In this sense, *Oyeyi* grounds dignity before achievement. Before a person is wealthy, fertile, elderly, honorable, ritually recognized, or socially successful, that person is alive; and life itself carries sacred weight.

At the same time, Idoma thought does not separate the sacredness of life from moral responsibility. Life is gift, but it is also task. Evil conduct is understood as harmful not only to the individual but also to family, lineage, and society. Bad action may bring shame, curse, disorder, and broken trust. The Idoma distinction between good life, *Oyeyi olohi*, and evil action, *odo bobi*, suggests that life must be cultivated through moral conduct. One's actions are not simply predetermined before birth. Moral life depends on reflection, restraint, and the discipline of desire. This point resonates with philosopher Adebola Babatunde Ekanola's critique of deterministic interpretations of Yoruba *Ori*. Ekanola argues that destiny should be understood less as fixed fate than as something made meaningful retrospectively through character and conduct. His statement that "the concept of Ori is meaningful only in a retrospective sense" helps clarify how communities read a life after it has unfolded (Ekanola 2006, 49). Idoma thought similarly emphasizes moral agency: one cannot simply blame God, spirit, ancestry, or destiny for evil. The human person is accountable.

This accountability becomes visible in and through *Okpiye*, the body, the tangible dimension by which the person appears, acts, suffers, and is recognized in the world. It is the part through which the human being appears in the world. Yet to call it visible is not to call it superficial. The body is the site of presence, labor, sexuality, aging, illness, suffering, kinship, and burial. It is through the body that the person works, greets, mourns, marries, gives birth, grows weak, receives care, and eventually becomes a corpse requiring ritual attention. The body is therefore not a mere shell. Nor is it a prison from which the spirit must escape (Hingi 2005). In Idoma thought, the body is the visible doorway of the person, while the invisible dimensions are the wind moving through the house. One cannot understand the house by looking only at its walls; yet without the walls, the wind would have no dwelling.

This view avoids rigid dualism. *Okpiye* depends on invisible dimensions such as breath, spirit, and mind, but those invisible dimensions do not make the body disposable. Even after breath departs, the body remains ritually and socially significant. Proper burial matters because death does not simply end the person's social existence. The body, though no longer animated, remains tied to transition, memory, and ancestral possibility. Our interlocutors described burial not merely as the disposal of remains but as a necessary act of care through which the dead are placed properly in relation to the living and the unseen world. In this sense, the body remains meaningful even after biological life ceases. Yet this claim also raises questions that will become important later in the article: how does death arrive in Idoma understanding, and how do persons, families, bodies, and spirits prepare for its coming? Death is not treated here as a sudden biological punctuation alone, but as a process in which signs are read, relationships are unsettled, kinship obligations are activated, and the departing person is gradually repositioned between the living community and the ancestral world.

The body's continuing significance, however, depends first on the presence of *Owu*, breath**.** *Owu* marks the fragile line between life and death. Breath is invisible, yet its absence is unmistakable. No one can hold it in the hand, yet everyone knows when it has departed. This makes breath one of the most powerful signs of the human condition: the person lives by what cannot be grasped. Breath also links the human person to divine animation, recalling wider African and biblical images in which life enters the body through the breath of God. In Idoma thought, *Owu* is closely connected to *Alekwu*, spirit.[2] The departure of breath signals physical death, but death does not destroy the person completely because *Alekwu* continues. Breath therefore names both vitality and vulnerability. It is the sign that the person remains among the living, but it also reminds the living that existence is held by something delicate.

Alekwu is perhaps the most complex element of *Ochelamu*, partly because it does not refer to only one level of spiritual reality. In much Adoka-Idoma usage, *Alekwu* names the spirit of the dead, or what the spirit becomes after it departs from the body at death and continues in the ancestral realm. Yet some of our interlocutors also personalize the spiritual principle within the living person as an internal force, a guiding presence, or a dimension of interior vitality, sometimes expressed as *Owoh*. *Alekwu* must therefore be handled carefully. It belongs to what exceeds the living person, but it also helps illuminate what animates the person while alive. It is tied to what predates and outlives *Ochelamu*: the divine source from which life comes, the ancestral world into which the dead enter, and the unseen field that surrounds human existence before birth, during life, and after death.

For this reason, translating *Alekwu* simply as "spirit" is insufficient if spirit is understood merely as an interior substance or a detachable ghost. In Adoka-Idoma thought, *Alekwu* is unseen and ethereal, yet it is not abstract. It is associated with *Owoicho*, vitality, breath, ancestry, and the moral order. When personalized as *Owoh*, it may be spoken of as a force that gives depth to one's personality and links the person to divine and ancestral reality.[3] Yet this interior spiritual presence does not cancel moral agency. Evil is not attributed to *Owoh* as though the person were merely governed by an invisible force beyond responsibility. Nor can a wicked life be explained away as the fault of one's personal or ancestral *Alekwu*. Wrongdoing belongs to the pattern of one's life, choices, and actions. *Alekwu* gives life, and *Owoh* deepens personality, but neither excuses wrongdoing. The person remains answerable.

This point prevents *Owoh* or *alekwu* from being misunderstood as a power that overwhelms human freedom. In the Adoka account, spirit is not the author of evil conduct. Wrongdoing belongs to the moral history of the person, to the way life has been chosen and lived. *Owoh* therefore intensifies rather than weakens accountability. It places the human person within a wider spiritual field, but it does not remove the burden of agency. The person is animated by what comes from *Owoicho* yet must still answer for what they do with that life.[4]

The eternal character of *Alekwu* also makes death intelligible as transition rather than extinction. At death, the spirit separates from the mortal body and returns to the ethereal realm, the *Alekwu* world, from which it came and by which it is named. Yet this return does not sever its relation to the world it once inhabited. The departed spirit, now fully *Alekwu*, remains bound to kinship, household, memory, and obligation. African traditional religions scholar Solomon Oduma-Aboh's discussion of Idoma cosmology is important here. He notes that, in Idoma thought, death “in the physical sense does not deny the dead participation in the affairs of the community”; those who depart enter the world of the “living dead” and remain interested in the activities of the living (Oduma-Aboh 2015, 3–5). Death is therefore not annihilation but relocation. Philosopher Aribiah David Attoe makes a similar point in his account of African metaphysical views of death, arguing that death is often understood as “transitional” and that one can “survive bodily death” (Attoe 2023, 312). In Idoma thought, the person is not extinguished like a lamp when the body fails; the flame moves into another chamber of existence, from which it may still warm, warn, trouble, or protect the living.

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[2] Interestingly, in Idoma, *Owu* means "wind" and is closely associated with *Alekwu* or spirit. The two terms may overlap in ordinary usage, especially when describing spiritual disposition or force. For example, *Owu-bobi* may mean "bad wind" or "nasty spirit," while *Owu-olohi* means "good wind" or "good spirit." A similar distinction appears in relation to *Alekwu*, as in *Alekwu-bobi* for evil spirits and *Alekwu-olohi* for good spirits. Although *Alekwu* can function as a general term for spirits, whether good or bad, it is especially associated with ancestral presence. *Aje* refers more specifically to ancestors or the spirits of the kinship group. In this sense, *Alekwu* is closely tied to life-giving power and to *Owu*, breath or wind, as the sign of animation.

[4] Although discussions of *Alekwu* often begin with death and ancestorhood, the term also names a force that may operate before and beyond death. In ordinary Idoma usage, *Alekwu* also can refer to the internal spiritual principle (*Owoh*) associated with a living person, but it may also designate external spiritual forces, especially the unknow evil and wicked spirits of the dead and others. These forces may be spoken of as good or bad, protective or troubling, depending on how they affect the living.

This continuing presence gives *Alekwu* its social force. The dead do not simply withdraw into memory. They may remain active within the moral life of the family. Our interlocutors described *Alekwu* as capable of watching over loved ones, protecting them from misfortune, revealing hidden truths, and awakening purpose among descendants. It may disclose the cause of recurrent illness, sudden death, business failure, family misfortune, or unresolved conflict. One interlocutor, for instance, recalled that when his father, a trader in Jos in Nigeria’s Middle Belt, died away from his hometown in Benue, his spirit appeared to his children in Benue and named those who owed him money before his death. The significance of the account lies not simply in the recovery of debt, but in the assumption that death does not silence unfinished obligations. What remained hidden in the world of the living could still be disclosed by the one who had crossed into the world of *Alekwu*. The departed may also confront those believed to have violated kinship obligation or concealed wrongdoing within the family. In this sense, *Alekwu* is not only metaphysical. It is also epistemic, moral, and juridical. It helps determine what is hidden, who is responsible, what has been broken, and what must be repaired. The dead do not merely haunt the living; they help organize the moral memory of the household.

This also explains why certain persons are believed to stand closer to the border between the human and spirit worlds. African metaphysical systems often treat infants, the infirm, the elderly, and the dying as liminal figures whose lives bend toward unseen realities. The Nigerian scholar of African traditional religions Mike Ushe’s study of Tiv death and burial rites is useful here because he shows that, in Tiv thought, childhood and old age are both transitional stages: the child is still emerging from the other world, while the elder is gradually preparing to return to it (Ushe 2010). This insight resonates strongly with Idoma accounts. Our interlocutors described virtuous elders and innocent children as *Alekwu*-human bridges. They may receive dreams, warnings, visitations, or messages from the spirit world. Children are spiritually significant because they have recently arrived from the other world; elders are significant because they are gradually moving toward it. Both stand near the doorway.

The process of dying reveals this threshold with particular force. According to our interlocutors, a person’s *Alekwu* may begin preparing for departure before biological death. This preparation may involve visits to distant relatives, brief greetings, or final conversations. The would-be *Alekwu* is often described as appearing hurried, distant, and unwilling to permit physical contact. Such accounts are especially associated with persons who are terminally ill and are said to exist between the living and the dead. The dying person is therefore not merely a patient. They are a threshold. Their body remains among the living, but their *Alekwu* has already begun to negotiate another belonging. In some accounts, if the visiting *Alekwu* is touched, the dying person may mysteriously recover, though such recovery may be accompanied by resentment toward those who have returned them from the peace of the *Alekwu* realm. However such narratives are interpreted, they show that death is not imagined only as a sudden biological punctuation. It is a gradual rearrangement of relation.

This rearrangement may also involve conflict in the spirit world. Our interlocutors explained that an approaching *Alekwu* may be accepted or rejected by spirits already in the ancestral (*Alekwu*) realm. In some cases, the spirit may be required to return to life because the person's death would endanger the family. This is especially so when the dying person is a breadwinner, a parent of young children, or someone whose death would leave dependents exposed to hardship, inheritance conflict, or household disorder. Death is therefore not only a private passage from body to spirit. It is a social event whose consequences ripple through children, spouses, dependents, property, lineage, and memory. The spirit world itself is imagined as attentive to these consequences. The dead do not simply receive the dying; they may judge whether the timing of death will fracture the living.

This point is crucial for the wider argument of this article because it shows how *Alekwu* binds metaphysics to vulnerability. A person's death may threaten children's futures, unsettle inheritance, expose widows to accusation, or intensify conflict over wealth. Our interlocutors noted that a surviving spouse, especially a woman, may be accused of alienating her husband from his family during his lifetime or preventing him from fulfilling obligations to kin. In such cases, she may be treated as the one who turned the husband against his people, and after his death she may face hostility, exclusion, or dispossession. Other accounts suggest that the spirit world may send a dying person back if their spouse is likely to misuse wealth, neglect children, or fail in obligations to the wider family. These narratives reveal that death in Idoma thought is not merely the end of breath. It is a crisis of kinship. The departure of *Alekwu* forces the community to confront questions of care, property, gendered blame, dependency, and moral responsibility.

This is why the children of the dead occupy a morally charged position in Adoka-Idoma thought. Our interlocutors emphasized that the *Alekwu* of deceased parents does not remain distant from their children. It watches over them, and when they are maltreated by relatives, guardians, or surviving spouses, it may respond through illness, misfortune, warning, or spiritual attack. For this reason, compassion toward the children of the dead, *ooyokwu*, is not simply a matter of ordinary kindness. It is also a recognition that the dead remain near those they have left behind. To neglect or abuse such children is to injure persons who are already vulnerable and to provoke the continuing moral presence of their deceased parents. Here again, *Alekwu* makes death socially active: the parent may be absent in body, but parental obligation and spiritual concern do not disappear.

A related dynamic appears in accounts of persons who die far from home: drown, die in war, or die in circumstances unknown to their families. Such deaths are especially troubling because the person's body, name, and ritual transition may remain unresolved. Our interlocutors described such *Alekwu* as restless, seeking ways to disclose the death so that the family may know what has happened and perform the necessary rites. In some accounts, a dying person may reveal at the edge of death that they have seen the spirit of a missing relative, alive-looking, healthy, or peaceful in the spirit world. Such testimony becomes a form of disclosure: the missing person is no longer merely absent but dead, and therefore in need of proper ritual recognition. The revelation is not simply informational; it makes burial, mourning, and remembrance possible.

This concern also explains why surrogate burial practices matter. When a person dies in war, drowns, or dies in a place where the body cannot be recovered, family members may collect sand, personal objects, fragments, or materials from the place of death and use them in burial rites. Teresia Mbari Hinga similarly notes that, in African understandings of afterlife and burial, rites may be performed symbolically when the body is unavailable, because proper ritual attention remains crucial for the dead (Hinga 2005). In the Idoma case, such practices reveal that the body is not disposable even when it is absent. The body holds the trace of personhood; it anchors memory, transition, and social recognition. Where the body cannot be brought home, something connected to the place of death may stand in for it, allowing the family to gather the dead into name, ritual, and belonging. Without such recognition, death remains unfinished. The person risks becoming neither fully mourned nor properly placed among the dead.

Here Attoe's discussion of the "living-dead" is again useful. Following Mbiti, he notes that "while the departed person is remembered by name, he is not really dead: he is alive" (Attoe 2023, 315). But Attoe also draws attention to the danger of the "second death," the loss of name and memory. In the Idoma case, this means that personhood remains unfinished even after bodily death. The dead need the living for name, memory, ritual, and recognition, while the living need the dead for protection, warning, continuity, and moral orientation. *Alekwu* therefore reveals that the human person is not completed at the grave. Personhood continues to be negotiated through remembrance, ancestral reception, family conduct, and the fragile moral economy between the visible and invisible worlds.

If *Alekwu* shows that the person remains connected to the living after death, *Ooyi*, blood, shows that this connection is already inscribed in life through kinship. Blood adds another layer to the Idoma account of the person. It is life-bearing, kinship-forming, and morally charged. In Idoma thought, "new blood" may refer to a newborn child and to life itself. Blood carries vitality, but it also carries descent and obligation. It links the person to family, lineage, ancestry, covenant, and accountability. Wrongly shed blood demands justice because blood is not neutral matter. It is life made visible. It is also kinship made bodily. Among the Adoka, blood is therefore treated as a potent force, a manifestation of vitality and life-giving power. This is why the taking of life is not understood merely as a physical act of violence. Our interlocutors explained that when one person unlawfully kills another, "their blood" may pursue the perpetrator for vengeance. In such accounts, blood is almost personified; it becomes a moral force (and symbolically, a person's *alekwu*) that remembers injury and demands redress. This allows the Idoma person to be understood not only as an individual body but as a blooded being, one whose life is already implicated in relations that precede and exceed the self.

Belgian Jesuit sociologist Willy De Craemer's comparative work helps clarify the significance of this point. He notes that African concepts of the person often include "the body," "the blood," "the name," "the breath," and "the shadow" as interconnected parts of a coherent plurality (De Craemer 1983, 22–4). This confirms that the Idoma emphasis on blood is not incidental. Blood is one of the ways personhoods becomes socially and spiritually embedded. It does not merely circulate within the body; it circulates through kinship, inheritance, prohibition, obligation, and memory. This also explains the moral seriousness attached to blood covenants in many African traditions. Such covenants are used to seal agreements when trust is uncertain, binding participants through oaths of blessing and curse. Among the Idomas, however, such pacts are formally discouraged or prohibited, even though they may still be performed secretly. The prohibition itself is revealing: blood is too powerful to be handled casually. To mingle blood is to place life, promise, and consequence into dangerous relation. In this respect, *Ooyi* helps show why personhood cannot be understood as isolated individuality. The person may stand alone, but the person's blood speaks in plural.

Ojiji, shadow, is one of the most distinctive dimensions of the Idoma account. The shadow follows the person and is spiritually linked to the person's being. It is sometimes understood as a sign that God watches human actions. Because of the connection between shadow and body, the shadow may be treated as vulnerable to harm, and children may be warned not to allow others to cross or step over their shadows.[5] The shadow is therefore not merely an optical effect. It is the visible companion of invisible personhood. *Ojiji* suggests that the human person is always more than what stands upright in daylight. A person casts a moral and spiritual outline in the world.

South African philosopher Motsamai Molefe's discussion of African-language concepts of dignity as related to "shadow" is useful here, even though he cautions against grounding dignity entirely in vitality or spiritual force (Molefe 2020, 38–9). In the Idoma case, *Ojiji* does not need to function as the sole basis of dignity to remain philosophically important. It reveals a deeper intuition: the person exceeds material visibility. Something accompanies the body, marks presence, and suggests accountability before God and community. To have a shadow is not simply to block light. It is to be a presence that leaves an outline in the moral world.

Finally, *Odo*, mind or moral consciousness, is central to agency. It is the seat of thought, feeling, warning, knowledge, intention, and decision. When a person senses danger or moral unease, the *Odo* may warn them.[6] A wicked person may be described as having an evil mind, *Odobobi*. This means that evil is not merely external behavior; it also inhabits intention and disposition. But *Odo* is not purely private. Its moral quality becomes visible through conduct. A good mind (*Odolohi*) is recognized in restraint, truthfulness, generosity, care, and responsibility; an evil mind becomes visible in selfishness, cruelty, deceit, and disregard for others.

Philosopher Polycarp Ikuenobe's moral-aesthetic theory deepens this point. He argues that in African communal traditions, "personhood combines goodness and beauty and aesthetic and moral features," such that moral character becomes socially visible as a kind of "inner beauty" (Ikuenobe 2016, 125; 128–34). In Idoma terms, a good *Odo* becomes legible through the form of a life. The mind (*Odo*) is not hidden behind the face; it appears through speech, conduct, obligation, and relation. Moral accountability is therefore not added to Idoma personhood from outside; it is already embedded in the way *Odo* joins thought, intention, warning, and choice. Wrongdoing cannot be attributed only to destiny, spirit, or ancestry, because the person is not merely acted upon by unseen forces; the person also acts.

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[5] Our respondents affirm this in their cultural belief, noting that, in some understandings, the dead are thought to have no shadow because the shadow departs from the body at death in a manner similar to the spirit. Others, however, hold that spirits may appear precisely as shadows when they arrive in a place, unless they choose to disclose themselves more fully to particular persons.

[6] In Idoma thought, *Odo* may refer to the mind, while *Otuh* refers more specifically to the human heart. Both are morally significant. *Odo* is often associated with intuition, warning, or foreboding: when a person is about to be killed, deceived, or defrauded, the *Odo* may alert them to danger. If the person acts quickly and later discovers the danger they avoided, they may say, "My mind did not agree with/allow me to…." Conversely, expressions such as *Odo bobi* or *Otuh bobi* refer to an evil mind or evil heart. Such a person is understood as one who refuses goodness, remembers injury, and continually seeks ways to harm others, even those who are peaceful.

Taken together, these components show that *Ochelamu* is both ontology and social grammar. It explains what the person is, but it also teaches how the person is to be read. Body, breath, blood, spirit, mind, and shadow are not silent metaphysical parts. They speak. They speak in sickness, dreams, family conflicts, burial practices, elder testimony, moral accusations, ancestral warnings, and everyday judgments about character. Philosopher Wilfred Lajul's claim that "the object of knowledge remains being" is helpful here (Lajul 2023, 85–6). Idoma personhood is a way of knowing being, but being itself is relational. As philosopher Munamato Chemhuru argues, African knowledge is grounded in a hierarchy and network of beings that includes God, ancestors, humans, and nonhuman forces (Chemhuru 2023, 95–6). The Idoma person is one node in this web, and to know the person is to know the web in which the person breathes.

This relational account must not be confused with a simplistic opposition between African communalism and Western individualism. Andanda and Düwell warn that "the opposition between an individualistic Western versus a relational African perspective is [not] a helpful framework for such an intercultural discourse" (Andanda and Düwell 2024, 2. Page numbers are not indicated in the online version; the references used here are based on manual numbering). Their caution matters here. *Ochelamu* is not important because it gives us an easy contrast between African relation and Western autonomy. It is important because it offers a dense philosophical anthropology in which life, body, spirit, breath, blood, mind, and shadow together form an account of the human person as sacred, embodied, relational, morally responsible, socially visible, and spiritually situated. Lartey's language captures this well: African spirituality is grounded in "interactive relationships among human beings and between humans and the entire order of existence" and is also "practice-oriented" rather than merely speculative (Lartey 2006, 19). *Ochelamu* is precisely such a practice-oriented anthropology. It does not only tell us what the person is. It tells us how the person lives, relates, fails, suffers, remembers, and remains answerable to others.

This first movement of the article therefore establishes the conceptual ground for what follows. The Idoma person is not a solitary self-enclosed within flesh, nor a disembodied spirit temporarily attached to a body. The person is a living convergence of seen and unseen relations. Yet this ontology already contains social consequences. If life is sacred, then contempt for the vulnerable becomes morally dangerous. If blood binds, then kinship carries obligation. If spirit survives, then death does not end responsibility. If shadow signifies, then actions remain morally visible. If mind judges, then the person is accountable. The next section turns from the composition of the person to the social work of personhood: how *Ochelamu* becomes a framework for moral regulation, communal recognition, dignity, judgment, and belonging.

Personhood, Moral Regulation, and Social Recognition

Because the previous section established *Ochelamu* as a constellation of life, body, breath, blood, spirit, mind, and shadow, the question now shifts from composition to social consequence. These elements do not only describe what the Idoma person is; they also shape how a person is recognized, evaluated, trusted, blamed, honored, or protected within everyday life. The key claim of this section is that Idoma personhood is not merely descriptive but normative. It does not only answer the question, "What is a human being made of?" It also asks, "What kind of human being has this person become?" In this sense, *Ochelamu* functions as a social grammar through which conduct is interpreted, moral standing is negotiated, and dignity is either affirmed or threatened.

Philosopher Elvis Imafidon's distinction between descriptive and normative personhood is essential here. The descriptive concept reveals "the ontological status of the individual," while the normative concept "reveals the social status of the individual" (Imafidon 2012, 7). This distinction maps directly onto the Idoma case. A human being may possess *Okpiye*, *Owu*, *Alekwu*, *Ooyi*, *Odo*, and *Ojiji*, but social personhood is evaluated through responsibility, moral conduct, kinship obligation, elderhood, ritual standing, and communal contribution. This is why philosopher Kwasi Wiredu's Akan formulation is helpful: if "life is an enterprise of mutual aid" *(Wiase yi mu yedi no nnoboa)*, then personhood is not simply possessed but shown through a demonstrated "sense of responsibility to household, lineage and society at large" (Wiredu 2009, 16).

Philosopher Motsamai Molefe's work on personhood as a moral theory helps sharpen this point. He argues that African personhood can be understood as an "agent-centred theory of value-- an African theory of virtue" (Molefe 2020, 17). Personhood in this sense is not merely given at birth but cultivated through moral effort. The ontological fact of being human is necessary but not sufficient for full normative personhood. Molefe writes that the normative notion of personhood refers to "the reflexive process of moral becoming, where the agent adds dimensions of moral virtue to her own humanity" (18). This idea resonates strongly with Idoma thought. As mentioned earlier, our interlocutors note that a person receives life from God, breathes by divine gift, and carries spirit, blood, mind, and shadow; yet one must still become morally reliable. Life is gift, but character is craft.

Here, however, caution is necessary. A strong normative view of personhood can become dangerous if moral failure or social nonconformity is treated as a reason to deny one's personhood. Philosopher Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe's critique of the "strongly normative view" is therefore indispensable. He argues:

> "Although the fact that a human agent exhibits in behavior autonomous compliance to appropriate norms may be a sufficient reason for counting her as a person, the fact that that agent may fail to so behave is never a sufficient reason for discounting, in whole or in degrees, her personhood. Alternatively, that the strongly normative constraint, with its additional feature" (Oyowe 2018, 785).

This question is especially important in the Idoma context because *Ochelamu* requires careful critical examination. As our subjects note, Idoma moral thought, like many communitarian traditions, often evaluates persons through conduct, responsibility, and social participation. Yet the worth of the human being cannot be exhausted by communal approval or moral success. A widow blamed by her husband's kin, a person experiencing mental distress, a childless woman, a disabled person, a poor elder, or a morally struggling youth does not thereby become less human. To confuse social esteem with human worth is to mistake recognition for dignity.

Molefe offers an important corrective when he argues that dignity should be grounded not in moral achievement but in what he calls **"**our capacity for virtue [sympathy]**"** (Molefe

2020, 35). He later clarifies that "a human person is considered to possess an innate capacity for virtue" and therefore deserves moral regard prior to performance (Gyekye 1992 in Molefe 2020, 49). In this view, human worth does not depend on success, status, or public recognition, but on the enduring moral capacities that belong to persons as such. Molefe therefore distinguishes between possessing dignity and merely failing to live up to social ideals, insisting that dignity is tied to the person rather than reputation or achievement.

This distinction is fruitful for interpreting Idoma thought. *Ochelamu* may name a person whose life is assessed within communal and moral frameworks, but the sacredness of *Oyeyi* suggests that fundamental worth precedes achievement, reputation, and status. The child, the ill, the disabled, the poor, and the morally fallen remain bearers of life, breath, shadow, and divine relation. They may stand in positions of vulnerability within the social order, but they cannot be stripped of personhood by it.

Still, it remains true that social recognition matters deeply. Sociologist Willy De Craemer's cross-cultural account of personhood shows that in many African frameworks, the self is not understood as "a discrete, private, bounded entity" but as "part of a living system of social relationships" (De Craemer 1983, 22). He further notes that "the stated relationship of the individual to significant, kinship- and village-defined others is so constitutive of the self" that serious disruption to these ties can threaten the person socially and spiritually (23). This is highly relevant to Idoma life. A person becomes socially visible through family, lineage, name, marriage, children, elderhood, labor, ritual participation, and moral reputation. The individual is not dissolved into the community, but individuality is mediated through social belonging. De Craemer carefully clarifies that Africans "are distinguished and distinguish themselves from other individuals" (22). Separation, then, does not mean isolation. The person is like a tree: distinct in trunk, but alive through roots.

Names, kinship, and ancestry are especially important. De Craemer observes that in many African societies personal names often "signify and express the person's status in particular social groups and categories," especially relations to kin and village membership (22). He adds that names may also indicate "the time and circumstances of one's birth" (Ibid.). In Idoma contexts, names, lineage, clan, and ancestral affiliations are not decorative markers. They locate the person within a social and spiritual map. To know someone is not merely to know private preferences or individual temperament. It is to know whose child they are, whose ancestors claim them, which obligations surround them, which deaths they mourn, which lineage remembers them, and which household may speak for them.

This is why social rupture can threaten personhood. De Craemer writes that "this stated relationship of the individual to significant kinship- and village-defined others is so constitutive of the self that any serious disruption" may inflict "dangerous, even obliterating damage to the person" (23). In the Idoma world, a person cut off from family, denied inheritance, accused of witchcraft, excluded from burial, or forgotten by descendants may experience not merely social inconvenience but a wound to personhood itself. The person is not only a self-contained consciousness; the person is a relation-bearing being. When relations break, the person's social body bleeds.

The moral regulation of personhood is also evident in truth practices. Nigerian philosopher Isaac Ukpokolo's argument that truth is "a social bond" and that "commitment to truth is the soul of justice" is especially useful (Ukpokolo 2023, 108–9). In Idoma life, truth about a person is rarely abstract. It concerns concrete questions: Who caused harm? Who violated kinship duty? Who deserves inheritance? Who neglected the dead? Who is responsible for illness or misfortune? Who can be trusted to speak? Who has lived honorably enough to become an ancestor? Truth, in this setting, does not float above social life. It binds, accuses, restores, and sometimes wounds.

This is why elders and ritual authority's matter. The feminist African philosopher Abosede Priscilla Ipadeola shows, through her discussion of *Ẹlẹ́ẹ̀rí* and *Ọmọlúàbí*, how epistemic justification may be inseparable from moral character. She argues that among the Yoruba, "it is character rather than age that qualifies an individual to be an ẹlẹ́ẹ̀rí (testifier)," meaning that credibility rests not simply on status but on proven integrity (Ipadeola 2023, 137). She adds that "Ènìyàn rere (good person) is ọmọlúàbí (virtuous person) who possesses the requisite pedigree of good character traits and veracity to bear testimony that validates a knowledge claim" (Ibid.). In this framework, testimony becomes trustworthy when the speaker is formed by truthfulness, restraint, and communal responsibility rather than mere seniority or power. Knowledge claims, then, are not evaluated by evidence alone, but also by the integrity of the speaker. Within Idoma life, elders, lineage heads, ritual specialists, morally upright parents, and sometimes innocent children may become reliable mediators of truth because they are believed to occupy morally weighty positions. Ancestors are similarly understood as moral presences whose authority regulates conduct, memory, and communal responsibility. They are not remembered merely as deceased relatives but as continuing guardians of family order, tradition, ethical conduct, and social peace. Their presence helps keep wrongdoing from disappearing into secrecy. Together, the dead, elders, and ritual institutions form an epistemic community that helps determine what is true about wrongdoing, illness, misfortune, or reconciliation.

The Agila Idoma traditional methods of conflict resolution provide a concrete example of personhood as social regulation. Scholars of African traditional religions, including Solomon Oduma-Aboh and his coauthors, argue that indigenous institutions remain significant because "societies can still apply indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms to address local conflicts" and because such approaches recognize "the role of culture in conflict management" (Oduma-Aboh et al. 2018, 108). Their discussion of the Agila Traditional Court shows that the Otse-Agila and council members mediate disputes "under oath to *Arekwu* and the *Aje* cult, the earth divinity," in order "to uphold truth" and communal peace (114). Conflict resolution here is not merely legal procedure. It is an enactment of personhood: disputants are not only parties to a case, but moral beings whose damaged relations must be restored within a sacred social order. The aim is not punishment alone, but reconciliation.

This also helps interpret *Alekwu* as a form of moral surveillance. In Idoma thought, *Alekwu* is often understood as an unseen guardian of morality and communal peace, a spiritual presence that watches conduct and may sanction violations of ethical and kinship norms. Fear of *Alekwu* can therefore become a powerful means of social regulation. Any serious analysis of this tradition must remain both appreciative and critical. On one hand, ancestral authority may preserve truth, memory, and responsibility. On the other hand, fear can become coercive. Spiritual power may heal communal life, but it may also intensify suspicion, especially in cases involving women, widows, infertility, illness, or domestic conflict. The same grammar that protects the community may also become a net that catches the vulnerable.

Gendered recognition is especially important. Idoma kinship is strongly patrilineal, and ancestral memory is often organized through the male line, with shrines and ritual practices preserving male lineage presence more visibly than female presence. Our interlocutors speaking on *Ochelamu* likewise suggest that the death of a man frequently generates sharper inheritance struggles than the death of a woman, reflecting patriarchal assumptions about descent and property. This raises a crucial question: if personhood continues through memory, ritual, and descendants, whose memory counts? If ancestorhood depends upon lineage recognition, who is more easily forgotten? If blood and descent matter, how are women positioned within systems that rely upon them biologically yet may marginalize them ritually? These questions reveal that *Ochelamu* is not only a compelling ontology; it is also a contested social field.

The symbolic death of monarchs in Idoma installation rituals offers another example of personhood as social transformation. Oduma-Aboh argues that when the ruler assumes office, he must become "dead to all the human attributes, feelings, tendencies and negativities," so that kingship is founded on moral discipline rather than personal appetite (Oduma-Aboh 2015, 1–2). He further notes that the monarch "becomes a father writ large to all and sundry," a public figure whose obligations now extend beyond household and lineage (Ibid.; 9). Ritual dramatizes a profound Idoma insight: some offices require the death of private desire. The monarch must be remade. He passes through symbolic death in order to become a public person whose body no longer belongs solely to himself. Authority becomes legitimate only through moral transformation for the sake of the community.

In this sense, *Ochelamu* does not simply describe human composition. It organizes a moral world in which persons are evaluated through responsibility, truthfulness, kinship obligation, restraint, justice, and care. Ikuenobe's language of the "good and beautiful" deepens this point. He argues that in many African communal traditions, "one is considered a person in a robust sense, only when one consistently acts or behaves in ways that are considered morally acceptable" (Ikuenobe 2016, 128). He further explains that "moral goodness is a normative necessary condition" for one to "be truly beautiful" and to count as a person (129; 145). Applied to Idoma thought, the honorable person is one whose *Odo* (mind), speech, blood relations, and obligations form a pattern of social harmony. Moral life becomes an aesthetic of relation.

Yet the danger remains: if personhood is too closely tied to harmony, those who disturb harmony or are perceived to disturb it, may be marked as dangerous. A sick person, infertile woman, mentally distressed person, disabled child, or widowed spouse may become the surface upon which society writes its anxieties. It is here that the next section turns: to the fragility of personhood under conditions of vulnerability.

Vulnerability, Crisis, and the Fragility of Personhood

Personhood becomes most visible when it is threatened. Illness, disability, infertility, mental distress, aging, death, and misfortune are not marginal topics in the study of *Ochelamu*; they are the testing grounds of the concept. A theory of the human person proves its depth not when life is orderly, but when breath weakens, blood is shed, mind is troubled, shadow is feared, kinship fractures, and the spirit approaches another world. Vulnerability is the place where ontology becomes social power.

The Idoma account of life as sacred offers an important protection against the social diminishment of vulnerable persons. Because *Oyeyi* is a gift from God, every life carries significance. Our subjects note that Idoma stories warn against despising the physically disabled or poor. This means that bodily difference or social disadvantage should not cancel dignity. Here, philosopher Laurie Calhoun's moral personhood framework is useful. She argues that "moral perspective" begins from the recognition that persons possess "a special sort of value or dignity that non-persons do not" and must therefore be regarded as having intrinsic worth "equivalent to one's own" (Calhoun 2005, 87–8). In an Idoma framework, this claim can be grounded not in liberal individualism alone but in sacred life: the person lives because God has given breath.

Yet social life does not always honor this sacredness consistently. Philosopher Adebola Babatunde Ekanola's discussion of Yoruba bodily difference reveals the danger clearly. He notes that in some Yoruba contexts persons such as "the *abuke* (hunchback), *aro* (cripple), *afin* (albino), and *arara* (dwarf)" are regarded as "eni-orisa (special people of the gods)**,**" yet are simultaneously "denied … the full opportunities open to normal people" (Ekanola 2006, 42). They may be barred from leadership roles and even excluded from ancestorhood. This paradox is highly relevant to Idoma personhood. A community may proclaim life sacred while still creating hierarchies of bodily normalcy, fertility, productivity, mental coherence, or ritual eligibility. Disability may be honored in myth yet marginalized in practice. The question, then, is not simply whether *Ochelamu* affirms vulnerable persons in principle, but how far that affirmation extends when bodies, minds, or social lives fail to meet communal expectations.

Illness is one of the most important sites of fragility. In Idoma thought, sickness may be interpreted through multiple registers: bodily weakness, spiritual disturbance, ancestral warning, moral consequence, family conflict, or hidden truth. Philosopher Sandra McCalla's discussion of Afro-Caribbean epistemology is helpful here because she insists that "knowledge is multidimensional" and that human beings know through culturally situated encounters with the world (McCalla 2023, 116). She also argues "that each culture construes knowledge differently," though this difference does not make one form of knowing superior to another (Ibid). A terminal illness may be medically diagnosed, but it may also be interpreted as a sign that the sick person is preparing to depart, or that unresolved family matters require attention. The dying person may be understood as sitting ambiguously between the worlds of the living and the dead. Such a person is not merely a patient; they are a threshold.

This threshold status has deep social implications. As mentioned earlier, our interlocutors describe how the spirit of a dying person may visit relatives before death, exchange greetings, and prepare for departure. In some cases, the spirit (*alekwu*) world may reject or delay the person's arrival if the death would endanger the family, especially if children, dependents, inheritance, or widows would be left vulnerable. This is a striking Idoma idea: death is not only biological cessation but social consequence. The person's departure may tear the fabric of kinship. The dead may be needed by the living; the living may not yet be ready to release the dying. Death therefore becomes negotiation between worlds.

Philosopher Aribiah David Attoe's work on death and meaning is especially important here. He observes that in many African philosophical traditions, death is not viewed as annihilation but as "an event that represents transcendence and transformation" (Attoe 2023, 317). Yet he also complicates any easy celebration of immortality by showing that meaning remains tied to memory, moral achievement, and social recognition. Drawing on Mbiti, he notes that the departed person "is not really dead: he is alive" so long as he/she "is remembered by name" within the community (315). Once remembrance fades, however, a second death follows. In Idoma thought, this means personhood remains fragile even after death. The dead need the living. Ancestors may guide the family, but ancestral presence also depends on ritual memory, descendants, and moral recognition. Personhood is therefore not completed at death; it continues to be negotiated through remembrance.

Infertility and childlessness become especially significant in this context. In Idoma thought, the condition of ancestors without living descendants to remember them, feed them ritually, or maintain their place within family memory reveals the social fragility of posthumous personhood. The Idoma saying that the one who has children eats while the barren one remains in sorrow captures how fertility, descendants, and ritual continuity may shape one's standing after death. This is a powerful but troubling insight. If descendants sustain ancestral memory, then the childless risk a form of ritual hunger. Here *Ochelamu* exposes the deep connection between body, reproduction, memory, and belonging. But it also raises ethical questions. Can a person's dignity depend on fertility? Can one's posthumous personhood be weakened because one had no children? These are not merely theoretical questions; they concern widows, infertile persons, unmarried persons, and those whose lives do not fit dominant expectations of continuity.

Widowhood is another site of vulnerability. Our interlocutors describe how a surviving spouse, especially a woman, may be accused of turning her husband against his family or misusing his wealth. Such widows may be labeled witches and face hardship and exclusion after their husbands' death. This reveals how personhood can be gendered through blame. When death disrupts inheritance and kinship stability, suspicion may fall upon the widow's body and reputation. Her personhood becomes contested not because she lacks life, breath, spirit, blood, mind, or shadow, but because social interpretation marks her as dangerous. Here, the grammar of personhood becomes a courtroom, and the vulnerable person stands accused.

Imafidon's argument is especially useful because it shows that African personhood is not a single flat status but a layered process of becoming. The individual exists first as a concrete human being, but social personhood emerges through the gradual formation of responsibility, judgment, obligation, and participation in communal life. He notes that, in African traditional thought, "a normal human being has three level[s] of existence; first, as an individual; second, as a member of a group; and third as a member of a community" (Imafidon 2012, 7–8). This layered existence matters for widowhood because accusation does not attack only the widow's private self; it threatens her place within the group and community through which her social identity is recognized. A widow suspected of turning her husband away from his kin, misusing his property, or blocking lineage obligations is not merely accused of an action; she is repositioned within the moral imagination of the community. Her grief becomes socially interpreted, and her body becomes a site where unresolved tensions over inheritance, loyalty, fertility, property, and lineage continuity are fought.

Imafidon's later discussion of normative personhood deepens the point. He writes that, "normatively speaking, one cannot be a person without a community," and that personhood "can be more or less, not the same at all times; it can be acquired and lost in time" (Imafidon 2012, 9). This claim is important for understanding how social personhood may be diminished not only by vulnerability, but also by grievous wrongdoing. Our interlocutors noted that persons who repeatedly cause pain to their families through acts considered grave or abominable, such as stealing, killing, witchcraft, the sexual violation of women, or the beating and abuse of women, may be warned repeatedly and eventually disowned. In some accounts, such persons may be attacked by *Alekwu* and forced to confess; if they refuse confession or correction, they may be struck by illness, banished, or treated as persons whose actions have brought shame upon the family. Their wrongdoing does not simply damage their private reputation. It can prevent others from relating to their families with the same trust, respect, and openness extended to other households. In this sense, wrongdoing becomes socially contagious: the offender's diminished personhood wounds the family's public standing.

Yet even here, the logic of personhood is not only punitive. It also contains a grammar of return. Imafidon explains that "what a person receives from God" belongs to the realm of ontological givenness, while "what one receives from the community are possibilities" that one may accept or reject (Imafidon 2012, 9). The community therefore does not simply manufacture the person; it provides the moral field within which the person's life is interpreted, corrected, praised, or condemned. In his words, "through a proper development of his mind, an individual becomes amenable to rational persuasion and moral correction within the community," and to that extent becomes "free, responsible and a person in the social sense" (Ibid.). This is important for *Ochelamu* because it shows that communal judgment must be tied to correction rather than mere exclusion. Our interlocutors explained that when offenders repent, they or their families may pay fines and perform acts of restoration (*ekah*), including buying beer and killing an animal for their age grade or relevant communal group, as a way of repairing broken relations and being reintegrated into social life. Personhood may be wounded by wrongdoing, but it may also be restored through confession, restitution, ritual repair, and renewed accountability.

This is where the Idoma case requires both appreciation and critique. The relational grammar of *Ochelamu* rightly refuses the fiction of an isolated self. A person is formed through blood, household, marriage, children, ancestors, memory, and moral obligation. Yet the same relational grammar becomes dangerous when social belonging is made conditional upon surviving accusation. Imafidon's use of Benezet Bujo is helpful here because personhood is never finally completed; even the ancestors remain dependent on the living, for "there is no end to the process of becoming a person in the Black African community" (Imafidon 2012, 9). Personhood is therefore ongoing, fragile, and relationally sustained. In cases of widowhood, our interlocutors suggest that the community may preserve the widow's personhood through protection, truthful discernment, and care; yet it may also wound that personhood through suspicion, exclusion, and inherited patriarchal blame. In cases of grave wrongdoing, it can discipline and restore; in cases of vulnerable accusation, it can misrecognize and destroy. The ethical test of Idoma personhood, then, is whether relation becomes a shelter, a sentence, or a path of repair.

This ethical test requires holding together two insights that are too often separated: the value of moral becoming and the irreducibility of human dignity. This is why philosophers such as Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe and Motsamai Molefe must be held together. Molefe helps explain why moral personhood matters: communities rightly value responsibility, care, generosity, and virtue. For him, personhood is an "agent-centred theory of value" and "an African theory of virtue" that calls the person to "realise her true humanity" (Molefe 2020, 17). He also writes that human beings come into the world with "a nature teeming with moral possibilities," so that the "pursuit of personhood, …a socio-moral process of transformation" becomes the conversion of these possibilities into moral reality (20–1). But Oyowe warns that failure, suspicion, or nonconformity must not erase personhood. Critiquing the strongly normative view, he argues that "the fact that [an] agent may fail to so behave is never a sufficient reason for discounting, in whole or in degrees, her personhood" (Oyowe 2018, 785). The widow accused by kin, the infertile woman without descendants, the disabled person denied ritual standing, the mentally distressed person viewed with fear, and even the morally culpable person whose actions have caused pain to family and community may all reveal the danger of an overly strong normative theory. The ethical tension within *Ochelamu* lies precisely here: moral evaluation and ontological dignity do not always move together. Communal life may require judgments about responsibility, harm, and repair, yet those judgments become dangerous when vulnerability itself is read as evidence of guilt.

The same tension appears in relation to mental distress and moral consciousness. Since *Odo* is the seat of thought, warning, feeling, and moral reflection, disturbances of mind may be interpreted as disruptions of the person's interior order. Imafidon notes that in Yoruba thought, insanity may be described as the brain not being "complete or in order" (Oladupo 1992 in Imafidon 2012, 5). Adoka-Idoma idioms express a similar concern through the language of the head (*ikpeyi*): a mentally unstable conditions are described as *ipkeyi kunujilan*, literally, "their head does not add up completely," *odegeyolikpeyi*, "something is disturbing him/her in the head," or *Ochekikpeyi*, "the sickness of the head." These expressions do not simply identify a medical condition; they reveal how mental disturbance is culturally read as a disruption of inner order, judgment, and social intelligibility. As Imafidon explains, *Opolo* is associated with "sanity and intelligence," so that when a person is mentally disturbed, the Yoruba may say, "*Opolo re ko pe*"— "his brain is not complete or not in order" (Ibid.). In Idoma terms, a troubled *Odo* (mind) and brain (*Okoto*) may affect how the person is perceived socially. The issue, then, is how such distress is interpreted within social life. It may call forth care, protection, and patience; but it may often become a surface onto which families project ancestral displeasure, witchcraft, curse, or moral deviance. In such cases, the suffering person risks being read first as evidence of a hidden problem before being received as someone in need of care.

Aging, by contrast, often intensifies personhood. Philosopher Munamato Chemhuru notes that, in many African frameworks, "'divine' wisdom is… usually associated with age" because "the older a person gets, the more wisdom he has" (Onyewuenyi 1976 in Chemhuru 2023, 96). Yet this claim must be handled carefully, since age does not automatically guarantee wisdom. Idoma thought similarly gives elders important roles as mediators between the living and the ancestral world. As mentioned earlier, children and elders occupy liminal positions: children are newly arrived from the other world, while elders are preparing to return. This makes them spiritually significant. Yet aging also brings vulnerability. The elder may become dependent, ill, neglected, or socially burdensome. If personhood is tied too strongly to productivity, the aged may be diminished; if tied to wisdom and ancestral proximity, they may be honored. The treatment of elders therefore reveals what kind of personhood a society truly practices.

Christianity, modern medicine, and social change complicate these dynamics. Sociologist Sandra Barnes's language of "additions and subtractions" and historical "stratigraphy" is useful here (Barnes 1997, 35–8). Contemporary Idoma personhood is not simply precolonial ontology preserved untouched. It is layered. Indigenous concepts of *Alekwu*, *Aje*, *Owoicho*, breath, shadow, blood, and mind now interact with Catholic theology, Pentecostal demonology, biomedical diagnosis, state law, formal education, migration, and global human rights discourse. Traditions are continually reshaped, reworked, and reorganized into new historical forms rather than simply preserved unchanged (Barnes 1997). This does not mean *Ochelamu* has disappeared. It means it now speaks through multiple accents.

In some Christian reinterpretations, ancestors may be recast as demons, though this appears to occur only in rare circumstances; illness may also be interpreted as spiritual warfare, moral failure as sin, and healing as deliverance. Biomedical frameworks may interpret illness through pathology rather than ancestry, while state law may regulate inheritance in ways that challenge patrilineal customs. Yet indigenous categories often remain alive beneath these newer languages. A family may take someone to the hospital and still ask what the ancestors are saying. A Christian may reject "ancestor worship" and still fear unresolved ancestral matters. A widow may appeal to legal rights and still face kinship suspicion. The social grammar of *Ochelamu* persists because it is not only doctrine; it is embedded in the way people interpret life.

This persistence is not necessarily conservative. It can also become critical. Wiredu argues that traditional culture may contain resources for contemporary problems and insists that "there are resources in it that we can draw upon, or more specifically, adapt in trying to solve our contemporary problems; and God knows that these are many and mighty" (Wiredu 2009, 10). He further cautions that **"**ethical wisdom does not necessarily increase with technological advancement" (Ibid.). Oduma-Aboh's work on symbolic death of monarchs shows how Idoma ritual ideas can critique corruption by imagining leadership as death to selfishness (2015). This is where *Ochelamu* carries critical force against contemporary forms of dehumanization. If life is sacred, then poverty cannot erase dignity. If blood binds, then kinship cannot be reduced to inheritance conflict. If shadow signifies divine witness, then hidden violence is still morally visible. If *Alekwu* remembers, then the dead cannot be treated as disposable. If *Odoh* matters, then moral responsibility must be cultivated. The Idoma concept of the person can therefore be read not only as an inherited ontology but as a critical resource for reimagining care.

The fragility of personhood lies precisely here: the same grammar can protect or wound. It can affirm the sacredness of life, but also moralize suffering. It can preserve ancestral memory, but also marginalize the childless. It can regulate truth, but also intensify accusation. It can honor elders, but also burden them with expectations. It can sustain community, but also punish those who fail to fit. This ambivalence does not weaken the concept; it makes it worthy of serious analysis. A living tradition is never pure light. It casts shadows because it stands in the world.

Conclusion

This article has argued that *Ochelamu*, the Idoma concept of the human person, should not be understood merely as an indigenous metaphysical account of human composition. It is certainly that, but it is more. It is a living social and moral grammar through which Idoma communities interpret life, responsibility, dignity, illness, kinship, death, ancestry, and belonging. Its components: *Oyeyi*, *Okpiye*, *Alekwu*, *Owu*, *Ooyi*, *Odoh*, and *Ojiji*, do not simply name parts of the person. They name relations. They connect the person to God, ancestors, family, blood, memory, moral consciousness, social recognition, and the unseen world.

The paper has shown that Idoma personhood belongs within broader African philosophical debates on ontology, epistemology, relationality, dignity, moral becoming, death, and communal recognition. Yet its contribution is not simply to place Idoma thought inside existing conversations. It shows how blood, shadow, breath, spirit, mind, and ancestral presence form a distinctive account of the person as visible and invisible, given and cultivated, sacred and accountable, individual and relational, alive and remembered. In this sense, *Ochelamu* does not merely repeat familiar claims about African relationality; it reveals how the human person is made intelligible through the dense interplay of embodiment, moral agency, kinship, memory, and the unseen.

The central contribution of this paper lies in shifting the question from metaphysical inventory to lived power. The issue is not only "What is the Idoma human person made of?" but "How does this idea of the person organize everyday life?" When this question is asked, *Ochelamu* appears as a framework through which people are recognized as honorable or dangerous, vulnerable or responsible, mature or incomplete, remembered or forgotten. It shapes how families interpret illness, how elders mediate truth, how ancestors remain socially present, how widows may be blamed, how the childless may be ritually vulnerable, how leaders are morally transformed, and how death becomes transition rather than annihilation.

The argument, however, does not permit an idealized reading of *Ochelamu*. Like all living grammars, it can be used to care or to accuse, to protect or to exclude. Its power lies in its ability to make life meaningful; its danger lies in its ability to make suffering morally suspicious. A critical examination must therefore hold together two truths: Idoma personhood offers profound resources for rethinking the human beyond Western individualism, but it also requires ethical scrutiny wherever its social uses diminish the vulnerable.

In the end, *Ochelamu* teaches that the human person is not a solitary spark floating in private space. The person is breath held by body, blood carried by kinship, shadow watched by God, mind shaped by moral choice, spirit moving between worlds, and memory sustained by the living. The person is a crossing point. To study *Oche Ola Mu* is therefore to study not only what a human being is, but how a society learns to recognize, wound, repair, remember, and sometimes forget the human.

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