

# CONTEXTUAL IDENTITY: THE CASE OF ANTON AMO AFER<sup>1</sup>

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## KEY CONCEPTS

Personal identity; Amo; narrative; experiential; communal; cultural; placial; contextual identity

## ABSTRACT

What does it take for a person to persist through the various changes that he or she undergoes in the course of a lifetime? Consider the case of Anton Wilhelm Amo. Assumed to be born in Ghana in the first half of the eighteenth century, Amo was brought to Germany at the age of three or four, where he was reared by a German Duke. He obtained degrees in the natural sciences as well as philosophy, and became the first black philosophy professor in Germany. Wiredu argues that Amo was an African and a philosopher, therefore, he was an African philosopher. Amo returned to, what Wiredu calls, “home”, “to his motherland”, after more than forty years. Could he have felt “at home” in Ghana? Was this really to be his “motherland”? Was Amo actually German or rather deep down Ghanaian? Who was Amo really? Amo’s is no rare case in our time of globalisation. This is reflected by a large number of discussions on migration, immigration, interculturalism and multiculturalism across the globe. Philosophically these questions are typically treated as questions of personal identity. The case of Amo seems to pose above all one particular and persistent traditional philosophical question: What fact about a person such as Amo

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makes that person the same person through the various changes that he or she undergoes in the course of a lifetime? This paper considers possible responses to this question by comparing concepts of narrative, experiential, communal, cultural and placial identity, and offers an alternative, contextual identity.

## INTRODUCTION

What does it take for a person to persist through the various changes that he or she undergoes in the course of a lifetime? Consider the case of Anton Wilhelm Amo. Assumed to be born in Ghana in the first half of the eighteenth century, Amo was brought to Germany at the age of around three or four, where he was reared by a German Duke. He obtained degrees in the natural sciences as well as philosophy, and became the first black philosophy professor in Germany (Mabe 2014: 11). Wiredu (2004: 205) argues that Amo was an African and a philosopher, therefore, he was an African philosopher. Amo returned to, what Wiredu calls, “home”, “to his motherland” after more than forty years. His “mother tongue” then had been German. Could he have felt “at home” in Ghana? Could he have found his motherland, his African roots? Was Amo actually German or possibly deep down Ghanaian? What is it about a person such as Amo that makes the person the same person throughout various times?

The first section introduces the question to be asked about Amo’s identity in more detail. The remaining sections consider possible responses to this question by comparing concepts of narrative, experiential, communal, cultural and placial identity, and offer, as an alternative, contextual identity.

## AMO’S QUESTION

Amo’s is no rare case in our time of globalisation. This is reflected by a considerable number of discussions on migration, immigration, interculturalism and multiculturalism across the globe. Various concepts are offered to answer questions concerning Amo’s kind of case. Philosophically these questions are typically treated as questions of personal identity.<sup>2</sup> The case of Amo seems to raise above all one particular and persistent traditional philosophical question, in Searle’s (2004: 280) words: “What fact about a person makes that person the same person through the various changes that he or she undergoes in the course of a lifetime?”<sup>3</sup> What fact about the sequence of or changes in events makes it the case that they are all events in the life of one and the same person? As Searle (ibid) puts it, this question poses the metaphysical problem of the existence and identity of a self across time. Amo serves

2 For some standard questions see Olson (2010: 2-7).

3 Searle (2004: 280).

as a poignant example of how one could raise such a question about anyone, but in particular someone undergoing a number of cultural changes. So the question as to who Amo was, on which this paper will focus, is: What fact about someone such as Amo might have made him the same person through various cultural changes that he underwent in the course of his lifetime? How should we understand the identity of a self across time?

There is no widespread consensus about what it means to ask about the identity of a “self” or “person”.<sup>4</sup> There is, in fact, some scepticism about the legitimacy of the notion of the self or person. The classical sceptical view is of Hume suggesting that each of us is nothing but “a bundle or collection of perceptions” (Hume 1978: 252). This paper will argue against the sceptical view in the last section, therefore it is not going to be discussed any further now, but rather, for our purpose, we will explore the view that there is a self, and, as it were, an Amo to search for. The most widespread classical view that there is a self is based on the conception of the self as identity pole. Kant is a major proponent of this view of the self as the subject to which any episode of experience refers back. The self is as such not experiential, but rather the unifying principle of our manifold experiences. There are two major current theories, which offer alternative notions to the identity-pole model of the self.<sup>5</sup> These are the self as narrative construction and as experiential dimension. There are, however, also some other important concepts of identity, which represent interesting approaches to the question as to who someone such as Amo might be. Without claiming that the list of concepts is complete, or that they might not overlap, I would like to compare some of these and then, in response, offer my own notion of what I call contextual identity. The paper will endeavour to show that these concepts can be taken to represent different core aspects of a life such as Amo’s. As these concepts are treated to represent different aspects of identity, I won’t select one or two for detailed discussion, but rather, because of limited space, give a brief outline of each. With the discussion of each concept it is shown how a new aspect of Amo’s life comes to the fore. The paper will not try to develop any biographical account. Apart from the fact that there is uncertainty around the biographical details of Amo’s life, I shall point out that a biographical description represents but one of various other aspects of who a person such as Amo might have been.<sup>6</sup> This brings us to an outline of the approach some concepts of identity might take to the question as to who Amo was.

4 Some take “self” to refer to metaphysical identity and “person” to moral identity. I shall follow Searle and treat the two terms to mean the same, using them interchangeably.

5 See Gallagher and Zahavi (2008: 197ff.); Olivier (2014: 92ff).

6 To be sure, my focus is also not on Amo’s philosophical work, but, again, on using his biography to demonstrate and evaluate concepts of personal identity. For discussions of his philosophical work, see, among others, Mabe (2014), Wiredu (2004), Edeh (2003).

## NARRATIVE IDENTITY

A popular version of narrative notions of identity is offered by Taylor in *Sources of the self*.<sup>7</sup> Basically, Taylor's idea is that the self is an achievement. It is not a given, not a living organism, but rather realised through a person's projects and actions. Eventually the self is constructed through a narrative of self-interpretations of these projects and actions. This view finds resemblance in Ricoeur's idea of the self as a *leitmotiv* of our lives. As Ricoeur's book title, *Time and narrative*, shows, the *leitmotiv* has a temporal order. Who I am is told by my life story, which links the beginning by birth with the end by death. Then again, in his version of the narrative self in *After virtue*, MacIntyre puts emphasis on social order. Our narrative is embedded in larger historical and communal meaning-giving structures, which means that we are not the only authors of our lives. My story is caught up in the stories of others. This implies yet another dimension, that is our belonging to cultural-linguistic settings whose aims and ideals, to a great extent, write the stories of our lives. The notion of narrative self can turn into a notion of a fictive self. In *Sweat dreams*, among others, Dennett argues that we cannot prevent inventing ourselves; we are hardwired to become language users, and once we are caught up in the web of language and begin spinning our own stories, we are not totally in control, but rather our tales tend to spin us.

At its core, narrative identity is viewed as an abstract centre of gravity; it is where all the stories (of fiction or biography) of an individual meet. A personal narrative core is what makes a person the same person through the various changes that he or she undergoes in the course of a lifetime.

What would Amo's narrative identity have been? A general response of the narrative view might look like this: Amo's identity is woven around a plot of what he will tell about himself and what we shall tell about him. So the starting point of a narrative view could be Amo's biography. But a biography will reflect facts spread over marked phases of a person's life, not his or her "centre of gravity". Furthermore, the facts of Amo's life are clearly not well documented. As Mabe (2014: 11) points out, we are not sure what his place of birth or his original name was, and we don't exactly know why he was relocated to Germany.<sup>8</sup> He was probably brought to Germany as the victim of slave-trade, and we are not sure about his status in the castle of German Duke Anton Ulrich of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel in Lower Saxony,

7 Note, the following single paragraph is taken from the author's previous paper (Olivier 2014: 92-3).

8 There are three hypotheses regarding the way Amo was brought to Europe, according to Abraham (1962): First, Amo was kidnapped, second, Amo was sold as a slave, third, Amo was brought to Europe to be trained as a pastor – see Mabe (2014: 11). African scholars such as Wiredu and Hountondji favoured the third hypothesis, which, according to Mabe corresponds with what is known at the time. Mabe contends that new research in the Ulrich-Anton-Archives shows evidence in support of the first thesis.

where he was reared. Some, Wiredu (2004: 200) or Gordon (2008: 36), for instance, say that Amo was freed from servitude by the Duke, adopted and raised by his (the Duke's) family, and that he enjoyed the benefits of a noble education.<sup>9</sup> Mabe (2014) doubts such a charitable treatment by the Duke and believes that Amo worked as a lackey. We know as little of Amo's return to Ghana and the last days of his life as of his infancy. It seems that it is only about his academic career that we know much. What would be the main plot of a story told about Amo the academic?

Consider the difference between some assessments of the core of Amo's academic life. Hountondji (2002), for instance, maintains that Amo's scholarly work in Germany could only be part, from beginning to the end, of a *non-African theoretical tradition* that exclusively belonged to the history of Western scholarship. Hence, Amo was in fact a Western philosopher who happened to be born in Africa. Period. Wiredu (2004), and so also Gordon (2008), venture to differ. Recall that Wiredu argues that Amo was an African and a philosopher, therefore, he was an African philosopher – regardless of whether his work falls within African philosophy. This argument seems to be supported by the fact that, as scholar, Amo used the name Antonius Gvilielmus Amo, usually adding to his name the title, *Afer* (from Africa) of Axim (Wiredu 2004: 205). A more convincing reason to argue that, at the core, Amo was an African philosopher is that, according to Gordon (2008) and Wiredu (2004), Amo dealt with topics of African philosophy such as demonstrated by his book entitled *The rights of Negroes in Europe*.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Wiredu even speculates that, in what appears to be Amo's Western philosophical writings, there are traces of his African origin. So, for instance, Amo developed a notion of the insensate mind, in contrast to Descartes' view, that is close to the Akan concept of the mind (Wiredu 2004: 204-5). Thus, Amo Afer's academic plot shows, so it is argued, that as academic Amo was throughout an African and an African philosopher.

Around the major academic plot one can spin the story of a young boy, taken away from home as a slave, working himself up to an academic hero, and, against all odds, advocating the rights of blacks, thus a first academic hero of the African liberation movement, and then returning to Ghana, to his roots, his real self, by heart an African and African philosopher.

But not everyone would support this academic plot. Rather, it seems that there are different stories woven around plots of who Amo really was. Which one holds the *leitmotiv* of his life, which one is true? Who is after all the real – or ideal – Amo? It seems that the narrative view of identity cannot account for this unequivocally. But more important, perhaps, might be the question as to what story Amo would tell about himself? What was it like to be Amo? This question brings us to a next possible concept.

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9 See also Firla (2002: 59).

10 Gordon (2008: 37); Wiredu (2004: 202).

## EXPERIENTIAL IDENTITY

The second model presents identity in terms of self-experience.<sup>11</sup> This notion of identity *qua* selfhood is supported by all major phenomenologists - Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. In their earlier works, both Husserl and Sartre supported self-scepticism, but later both distanced themselves from it. For Husserl, in his *Ideas*, the self is not given as material entity, but rather it is constituted in the process of experience (interchangeably regarded as consciousness) as the subject or ego of that experience. The self is the one that carries ownership of a particular experience as the “I” of the experience, but it is also the one that synthesises the flow of many different experiences into a history of experiences. So, there is no “second self”, but rather a “self in abstraction” synthesised in the process of experience. Heidegger’s view in *Being and time* is that every experience is characterised by the fact that I am always somehow acquainted with myself. “Being-in-the-world” means a pre-reflective awareness of *my*-being-in-the world, of the mine-ness of the world as my personal environment. Thus every form of experience is first-personal and in this sense self-experience. Sartre, in *Being and nothingness*, contends that subjective experience or consciousness is at bottom characterised by self-appearance or self-reality, which he terms ipseity or selfhood. The “self” coincides with phenomenal or first-person consciousness, so there is always a sense of mine-ness to any experience. Merleau-Ponty, in his *Phenomenology of perception*, understands selfhood in terms of embodiment – as he famously states: “I am my body, I am a body-subject.” In other words, to experience means to be “some” body that experiences and who is in some way always aware of being that experiencing body. In fact, the way objects affect us always goes along with self-experience, of a self, affecting itself by tuning itself into these objects.

Contrary to the narrative versions of the self, the experiential version, particular to phenomenology, does not take selfhood as precondition or product of experience, but as an integral part of it. The self is not the same as experience but the mine-ness that accompanies all experiences. A sense of self always goes along with one’s first-personal experience. Thus, there is the assumption of a core self, some minimal form of self-experience, underlying all experiences, which is essential for selfhood.

Back to Amo. Amo never told us about what it was like to be Amo, or rather Wilhelm Amo, as he is more generally known, or as he referred to himself, Antonius Gvilielmus Amo Afir from Axim. Experiential identity holds that we are always aware of ourselves being the owners of our experiences. However, as owners of our experiences we have names. Thus, although we don’t always think of our names, our self-awareness must at least implicitly include our names. As owner of his names, Amo’s names must have accompanied his self-experiences more or less implicitly.

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11 The first, single paragraph of this section is a slightly edited version of a paragraph taken from Olivier (2014: 93-94).

Consider his different names. After being removed from home, his original name was replaced by “Amo” – ironically the Latin for “I love”. The name was no addition to his existing name but was meant as its obliteration, the traumatic unmaking of his previous life.<sup>12</sup> Amo may have been marked by this act of negation for the rest of his life. But then Amo received yet another name – or rather set of names. In 1708 he was baptised in the Saltzthal Chapel of Wolfenbüttel Castle, renamed after Anton Ulrich and Ulrich’s son. Following a ceremony at the chapel in 1721, Amo was called Anton Wilhelm Rudolph Mohre; Mohre refers to Moor, dark skin. What must a boy of eight have felt like being all these names, being part of a family, but then as the outsider, the Moor? Later Amo, the author, would refer to himself in the same ambivalent way by adding to his Latin names Afer – from Africa. This time the self-reference to Africa was of his own making. It seems that with this reference he demonstratively took ownership of his experiences. Was this because his blackness, his Africanness, was always accompanying his experiences and that he wanted to point this out critically? Amo’s black body, if we can apply Merleau-Ponty, will have accompanied all his experiences; was this what he was referring to? In the *Annals of Halle*, Amo was described as “a genuine Negro but a humble and honourable philosopher”.<sup>13</sup> Was his reference to Afer a reflection of his continuous experience of racism in more or less crude forms? When Amo finally sailed to Ghana, “home”, what did he call himself there? What was really going on in Amo by that time? Limited to his self-experience Amo’s identity remains largely unknown to us. But even if Amo would have been able to talk about his experience, about being Amo, or Anton Mohre or Amo Afer, who could really know what it might have been like to be the bearer of such symbolic names? It seems that the concept of experiential identity shows us some vital aspects of Anton’s experiences but little can be inferred with certainty about his core *self*-experiences. Let us thus examine a contrary concept that shifts the focus from self-experience to communal identity.

## COMMUNAL IDENTITY

Communal identity is introduced by and popular among African philosophers. The notion of a communal identity is based on what is called African communalism or communitarianism. In his recent book, *Self and community in a changing world*, Masolo (2010) offers a concise introduction to African communitarianism in comparison with Western communitarianism.<sup>14</sup> According to Western communitarianism in general, individuals are seen constituted by the institutions and practices of which they are part, and their rights and obligations derive from those same institutions (Masolo 2010: 229). Western communitarianism puts emphasis on the significance of the

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<sup>12</sup> See Mabe (2014: 13).

<sup>13</sup> Liukkonen & Pesonen (2008).

<sup>14</sup> See also Masolo (2004).



individual's participation in as well as dependence on the community for his or her sense of self, for her freedom, and for her moral development and agency. However, so Masolo argues, Western communitarianism functions more as a watchdog for the common good than as a robust communitarian theory. As an example of a robust theory, Masolo takes Senghor's idea that autonomy stops with the materiality of the individual body, and that beyond their bodies, persons are socially conditioned; they are "herded" toward specific civilisational worlds that are defined by whole sets of values, as manifested in the cognitive and practical behaviour of their individual members that distinguish them from others. Thus, people live their lives by the values instilled in them by their social institutions. Admitting the romantic element of such communitarianism – or communalism as it is also called – Masolo (2010: 237) still holds to advocating it in its robust form with the goal of "...a life of cohesion, or positive integration with others".<sup>15</sup>

Communalism manifests, so Masolo quotes Wiredu (1996: 19), through a process of learning: "Human life is a learning process, which begins almost immediately on arrival in the world. This learning has to be in the context of a society, starting with the narrow confines of mother or nurse and widening to larger and larger dimensions of community as time passes. This learning process, which at the start is nothing much more than a regime of conditioning, is, in fact, the making of mind. In this sense a new-born baby may be said to have a brain but no mind, a reflection that is in line with the traditional Akan view that a human creature is not a human person except as a member of a community" (Masolo 2010: 244).

In support of Wiredu's view, Masolo (2010: 241) recounts that, typically, in traditional African villages, children go through all kinds of processes before they get the rite of passage. One of them is initiation. Such rituals are an important aspect of the rite of passage, they "create a person out of the untamed and unmolded body of a child" (Masolo 2010: 242).<sup>16</sup> However, as Masolo, like Wiredu, stresses, rituals

15 Masolo's view is reflected in other African views of communitarianism, in particular by Menkiti who also offers a sharp contrast between Western and African communitarianism (Menkiti 2004). For Menkiti, in the African view the community defines the person as person, qualities such as rationality or will are non-essential; thus personhood is acquired in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's social and moral stations. Gyekye (2002: 300) gives a more general, inclusive description of communitarianism. First, the person does not voluntarily choose to be part of the community. Second, the human person is at once a cultural being. Third, a person cannot live in isolation from other persons. Fourth, human persons are naturally oriented towards others. Fifth, social relations are not contingent but necessary. Finally, so Gyekye adds critically, the person is only partly constituted by social relations and needs to unfold morally.

16 Of course not all Africans undergo initiation or pass the "forest". The practices are still widely sustained though, also among modern Africans.



are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the rite of passage. Social and moral development is required as well for the rite of passage to communal selfhood.

Let's return to Amo. According to the African communalist view, children go through all kinds of processes before they arrive at the communal rite of passage. One of them is initiation. Such rituals are important aspects of the rites of passage; they "create" a person out of the untamed and unmolded body of a child". When Amo was taken from Ghana he was about three or four years old and did not yet qualify for the rite of passage. He was, according to Masolo's (2010: 241) view, not yet a person, but an untamed child; in Wiredu's (1996: 19) language, a "brain without a mind", a human creature and not yet a person; in Menkiti's (2004: 325) language, an "it". One becomes a person by being educated (conditioned) and socialised (integrated) by the community prior to obtaining the rite of passage. Amo was educated and socialised as a German not as an Akan. He was a product of the education of the Enlightenment, reared in the castle of a highly educated philanthropist, studying and lecturing in Halle and Jena, then emerging centres of the Enlightenment in Europe. His mother tongue became German, but he also mastered Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and French, and spoke fluent English as well as Dutch (Mabe 2014: 16). In addition to a doctorate in philosophy, Amo received a degree in the sciences at the University of Wittenberg in 1733. In his address at this occasion, the Rector of the University emphasised the high regard Amo held in academic circles and said that his work proved that Amo's intellectual ability was as great as his powers of teaching.<sup>17</sup> According to the Rector, Amo was held in high regard in academic circles. That could be a rite of passage.

Thus Amo seemed to be an excellent communal product of German, or rather, Western, making. This is well reflected by his qualification, reputation and works. He wrote philosophical works in Latin, the academic language of his time, and, according to Hountondji (2002), his works are of a non-African theoretical tradition that exclusively belonged to the history of Western scholarship. It seems that the communalist has to consider Amo a "German philosopher", or "European", at the least, as Hountondji does.

Wiredu (2004) would object that there are reasons to argue that Amo was, despite his German upbringing and education, still African, and, as he wrote on topics of African philosophy and referred to himself as African, he deserved a rite of passage as African and African philosopher. No wonder that he returned "home". Indeed, so Gordon (2008: 37) writes, back in Axim in Ghana, Amo found his birth siblings and was welcomed as a traditional doctor. The lost son had come home.<sup>18</sup>

Still, how can the communalist really claim that Amo was "African" when he received his "rite of passage" in Europe and lived and practised philosophy accordingly? Recall, despite the discrimination of the day, Amo was a highly

17 See Liukkonen & Pesonen (2008).

18 See Mabe's (2014: 21) discussion of the New Testament parable of the lost son and African nostalgia. Mabe does not depict Amo being welcomed home.

acclaimed member of the academic German society. So, if the communalist claim is that one becomes a person by being educated to take a position and being integrated in society, then Amo can't be called an African without inconsistency.

But can we call Amo "German" with consistency either? Did he not refer in his works to himself as the African? Did not the title of his first book on the rights of blacks in Europe critically reflect the lack of equity needed for the sake of what Masolo calls cohesion and positive integration? In Halle a play publically lampooned Amo (Gordon 2008: 37). It was a racial insult inflicted by the community of the city. Was such communal racism the reason for him, finally, to turn his back on Germany and go "home"? There seems to be reason to say that it does not look like we can call Amo "German" without inconsistency either.

Perhaps it is implausible to describe Amo's identity in strict mono-cultural, communal terms such as German, European, Ghanaian, African. Instead one might consider addressing communal identity from a transcultural perspective. This is what the next approach to identity would suggest.

## CULTURAL IDENTITY

In his article "Transculturality: The puzzling forms of cultures today", Welsch (1999) introduces the concept of transcultural identity, as opposed to single culturality, interculturality and multiculturalism, with the claim that the concept of transculturality is the most adequate concept of culture today. His idea of transculturality can be well employed to analyse Amo's kind of cross-cultural situation.

According to Welsch (1999: 194ff), monoculturality is characterised by social homogenisation, ethnic consolidation and intercultural delimitation. This means, firstly, every culture is thought to shape the lives of its individuals, "...making every act and every object an unmistakable instance of precisely *this* culture" (ibid: 194). Thus, a culture is unificatory and encompasses the life of any person such that every person is an instance of this culture. Secondly, culture is thought to be the culture of a folk, it is folk-bound and represents the essence of a folk's existence (ibid: 195). Thirdly, "every culture is, as the culture of one folk, to be distinguished and to remain separated from other folks' cultures", hence, it is separatory (ibid: 195).

Interculturality, according to Welsch (1999: 196), can be understood as an attempt to overcome the separatism of monoculturality by advocating "ways in which such cultures could nevertheless get on with, understand and recognise one another". However, interculturality still "proceeds from a conception of cultures as islands or spheres", retaining their separatist character (ibid: 196). Thus, by still presupposing separatism, the advocacy of overcoming separatism, albeit well-meant, remains cosmetic and structurally inept.

Multiculturalism, according to Welsch (1999: 196), poses a similar problem. It addresses the problems caused by the fact that different cultures have to live

together within one society instead of different societies. Multiculturalism “seeks opportunities for tolerance and understanding, and for avoidance or handling of conflict”. However, while attempting to overcome the differences between a variety of cultures living in one society, multiculturalism still presupposes the separation between cultures.

Transculturality manifests on a macro and micro-level (Welsch 1999: 197). On the macro-level it is the consequence of the inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures, the global networking between cultures, and the hybridisation of cultures as worldwide shared mobility, information and merchandise causes crossbreeding and suspends “foreignness” (ibid: 198). On the individual microcultural level transculturality is gaining ground as well. “For most of us, multiple cultural connexions are decisive in terms of our cultural formation. We are cultural hybrids. Today’s writers, for example, emphasise that they’re shaped not by a single homeland, but by differing reference countries, by Russian, German, South and North American or Japanese literature. Their cultural formation is transcultural (think, for example, of Naipaul or Rushdie) – that of subsequent generations will be even more so” (Welsch 1999: 198).

Welsch concludes that sociological theory since the seventies may have become true and modern lives are to be understood “as a migration through different social worlds and as the successive realisation of a number of possible identities”<sup>19</sup>, so that “we all possess multiple attachments and identities” – “cross-cutting identities”<sup>20</sup> (ibid: 198). However, contrary to the idea of global homogenisation in the sense of the uniformisation of cultures, transculturalism holds that new forms of cultural diversity emerge from transculturalism, which are more complex because less separate than ever before (ibid: 203ff).

How would the transcultural model deal with a case such as Amo? If Amo is thought to be a product of transcultural crossbreeding, then it would be wrong to think of the diverse cultures that shaped him in terms of separate roots; rather it would be more appropriate to recognise and account for the complexity of the way he was subjected to diverse cultures. There are reasons to make a strong transcultural thesis. Firstly, the Enlightenment itself was a time of cross-cultural thinking as, for instance, people learnt, wrote, communicated and traded in multiple languages. Amo is a product exactly of such a culture by mastering German, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, English and Dutch. Furthermore, was he not the one to refer to himself as author by using both his Latin-German names as well as his African heritage? But then, if as author he would refer to his African heritage, one should not be surprised to find African elements of thinking in his philosophical writings, as Wiredu (2004) and Gordon (2008) seem to believe. Indeed, it seems worthwhile enquiring how far Amo maintained hybrid, multivalent elements in his philosophical thinking. Such an

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19 Berger, Berger and Kellner (1973: 77) quoted by Welch.

20 Bell (1980: 243) quoted by Welch.

enquiry might be supported, as Hountondji (2002) maintains, by the fact that Amo wrote not only on typically European scholarly topics but also, as Wiredu maintains, on issues of African philosophy such as the rights of blacks. Maybe Amo's works show no mono-cultural European or African elements of thinking just because they are the products of the assimilation of diverse roots of thinking. All in all, one could argue that the question whether Amo is German or Ghanaian, European or African, might be mistaken. Amo rather might be taken to be a hybrid, a tree with many roots. Trace the roots and find the tree.

Wiredu said that Amo went back home, to his "motherland". Did Amo go back to Africa to find his real roots after all, or is it rather the case that he never really felt rooted in Germany because of the racism that he was said to experience so often through the course of his lifetime?<sup>21</sup> What roots could Amo have found in Ghana, or for that matter Africa? Why so silent while being in Africa? Again, Gordon (2008: 37) wrote that in Ghana, Amo was welcomed by his siblings and accepted as a traditional doctor. But then what prompted him to retreat into the Dutch Fortress of San Sabastian for reasons of safety? Why did he stop publishing there? Who is the hybrid tree, Amo, if we can't really trace his diverse roots? If transcultural identity is, as Welsch puts it, woven from different threads, it looks like Amo's web tore apart in Europe making him end in silence in Africa. Did he finally, as it were, find his "place" in silence? Was there any place for Amo, or was he finally "displaced", a torn or even uprooted hybrid? Does the idea of a transcultural web account adequately for the internal clashes and conflicts that hybrids experience? In Amo's case seemingly not. So our question remains unanswered by the transcultural view. Who then was Amo? As indicated, we should maybe pursue the question of place; where was Amo's place?

## PLACIAL IDENTITY

Recently there have been a number of reflections on the "geography" of reason, especially among philosophers who deal with post-colonial philosophy and consider the manner in which the industrial North or West colonised the minds of the South. There is also a renewed interest among different schools of thought, both analytical and continental, in the ways our "life world", or "embodiment", or "situated cognition" shape our minds, our identity, and eventually the philosophy we do.<sup>22</sup> As a result we have seen some publications on the nature and import of the concept of "place" by authors such as Malpas and Janz. What follows is a very brief outline of their views of placial identity.

Janz (2009: 110-111) defines "place" in terms of our "life world", the context of our lived experience. This means, the question of place is not so much a question of

21 Reasons for his returning to Ghana are unclear, for a discussion see Firla (2002: 71ff).

22 See, for instance, Thompson (2007); Robbins and Aydede (2009).

territorial space, about where someone, for instance, a philosopher such as Amo, is living, but rather it is a question of lived experience; of “what it is to do philosophy” wherever a philosopher is living. In other words, for any person the question of place would be: What is it like to be and act wherever he or she is living? For a philosopher such as Amo the question would be: What is it like to do philosophy as a black philosophy professor in Germany in the early eighteenth century?

Drawing on Heidegger, Malpas (1999; 2006; 2014) sheds more light on what it could mean to ask what it is like to live and act in a place. Also Malpas argues, both in *Place and experience* (1999: 36) and *Heidegger's topology* (2006: 33ff), that place does not merely refer to territorial space, but rather has the transcendental character of making possible the appearance of the mutual interconnectedness of things, persons and locations, constitutive of our experience and identity. An example of such a place is a workroom, which displays an equipmental interconnectedness of things, thus enabling us to perceive and use them as equipment, and, for instance, play the role of a carpenter. As such place denotes the space of living in which we are involved, and to which we belong together with others (Malpas 2014: 17). In this sense place is an abode, a space of belonging, of being together, home. As togetherness is inclusive, it implies the acceptance of differences, thus place is open to whoever belongs together (ibid: 18). What it is like to belong together with others will conversely convey a person's placial identity.

Where was Amo's place? If he was a “torn hybrid”, as argued in the previous section, did he have a place at all? Is it possible not to have a place? Let me answer by means of a little detour. It is significant to note that Wiredu defends the view that “there is no equivalent, in Akan, of the existential ‘to be’ or ‘is’ of English, and that there is no way of pretending in that medium to be speaking of the existence of something which is not in space” (Masolo 2010: 156). According to Wiredu (1996), “in the Akan language to exist is to *wo ho*, which, in literal translation, means ‘to be at some place.’” In the Akan understanding, existence is always locative, in relation to something else. To speak of someone not to have a place, means the same as saying, he or she is not. So Amo must have had a place. Place is an a priori in Akan. And so it is for Heidegger (1990), as Malpas will concede, who famously introduced his concept of being as being in the world. To be is to be in the world, and this means to be in some place. Thus Amo must have had a place.

It is, however, one thing to maintain that place is an a priori of human being, another to consider the quality of being in a particular place. It does not take much to imagine the trauma Amo must have suffered to be taken away from home as a young child, and delivered to a fortress in Axum, Holland, a foreign place, where people were traded as slaves, and, irrespective of their age and gender, were humiliated, beaten up, raped (Mabe 2014: 9-10). Nobody was allowed to speak in his or her mother tongue, they were renamed, relatives were separated, all “belonging together” was denied. They were truly displaced, out of their place in this place. Little Amo

was “lucky” to be delivered to a castle where he was, so it seems, treated well and received a good education. Duke Anton Ulrich granted him the privilege to be named after himself and his son, thus he was adopted by the family. But then of course, he was called Amo Mohre, Amo the Moor, the dark-skinned. He was “together” with a family to which he did not really “belong” because he was black. Once again he was displaced, out of his place in his place of living.

It seems that Amo was not only culturally but also placially a torn hybrid. He was privileged to belong to noble circles in Germany, but this remained the asymmetric privilege of grace bestowed upon those considered to be lesser because different: foreign, black, slaves. In Halle, Amo had close friends such as his student Moses Abraham Wolf, or Gottfried Achenwall, and, again, he was held in high regard by colleagues, but he was said to remain an outsider in every city he lived. One can be together with people and even belong to them in the best of ways, but the context might just be such that one remains the outsider, the black – or white – foreigner, the African in Germany, or the German in Africa. When Amo went “home” he had but, so Galandat reported, a “poor life” (Mabe 2014: 21). Retreating in a Dutch fortress it seems he remained the outsider also back “home”.

It does not seem like Amo could have identified with any place such that it granted him a sense of “belonging together” throughout changing times in the course of his life. Thus “place” could not have captured the core of his identity, but rather, like in the case of other concepts of identity, also place seems to represent but an aspect of the life of a person throughout different times. As an alternative this paper suggests contextual identity. This brings us to the last section.

## CONTEXTUAL IDENTITY

Concepts of identity typically claim to distinguish what they take to be the core of a person’s life throughout different changes over the course of her lifetime. The sections above tried to show how some major concepts of identity represent what is purported to be a core aspect of a life such as Amo’s, be it his or her narrative, self-experience, community, culture or place. With the discussion of each concept a new aspect of Amo’s life has come to the fore. Accordingly, personal identity seems to be constituted in terms of a person’s identification with core narratives, experiences, communities, cultures, or places.

One can use two standard grammatical constructions to help sort out these forms of identification as genitive relations or relations of belonging: the genitive of the



subject (*genitivus subjectivus*) and genitive of the object (*genitivus objectivus*).<sup>23</sup> The use of these constructions goes back to Heidegger's *Identity and difference*,<sup>24</sup> but is applied to personal instead of ontological identity. Hence, I apply these genitives to the relationship between being a person or being human and different aspects of her being.

The genitive of the subject applies when a person identifies him- or herself with core aspects of her life which she takes to belong to herself throughout different changes in the course of her lifetime. Following the above concepts of identity, such aspects include narratives, experiences, communities, cultures or places. Consequently a person might state: this is my personal story, my self-experience, my community, culture or place.

Whereas the genitive of the subject refers to core aspects with which a person identifies herself, the genitive of the object, conversely, pertains to the way a person is identified by means of such aspects. For instance, what I take to be my story makes me a character belonging to a story woven around a plot including other characters in that story. As much as I claim it to be my story (genitive of the subject), it will be a story to which I belong (genitive of the object). Also what I claim to be my self-experience will consist of experiences constituting me as the person to undergo and be shaped by these experiences. In the same way I belong to the community, culture or place of living which I identify with and others will recognise me as belonging to that community, culture and place.

We refer to core aspects of our lives in first-personal terms and speak of *our* stories, experiences, communities, cultures, or places. So we seem to prioritise the genitive of the subject over the genitive of the object. However, when we introduce ourselves to others, we typically offer a narrative or experiential account of our place of origin, community or culture. While we use the genitive of the subject to refer to

23 For the standard use of these genitives, from which I slightly deviate, see <http://www.orbilat.com/Languages/Latin/Grammar/Syntax/Syntax-Cases-Genitive.html>. The genitive of the subject denotes a person (or an object), to whom or to which something belongs (for instance, the love of the mother, meaning the mother is loving), and the genitive of the object denotes a person (or an object) which is the object of and in this sense belongs to an action (for instance, love for the mother, meaning the mother is loved).

24 In *Identity and difference* Heidegger (1990: 53) explores these two grammatical constructions to sort out ontological identity and difference. The purpose of this article is not to discuss Heidegger's use of these grammatical constructions to explain ontological identity, but rather to apply them to the issue of personal identity. In its ontological sense Heidegger views these grammatical constructions to denote the relation between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seienden*). The genitive of the subject subordinates beings to Being (Being of beings), which conveys that different beings are identified with or belong to Being. The genitive of the object subordinates Being to beings (beings of Being), and means Being is identified with or stated to belong to different beings.



what belongs to us, we seem to identify ourselves over the genitive of the object, introducing that to which we belong. Identity seems to have an inverse structure, in that it is not what belongs to us but what we belong to which comes first. Thus the genitive of the object seems to precede the genitive of the subject.

The reason for this inverse structure lies in the fact that both those genitives are preceded by what I call the *genitive of the context*.

“Context” refers to situation, environment, milieu, setting, background, scene, climate, atmosphere, ambience, mood, feel, conditions, circumstances, surroundings, factors, state of affairs.<sup>25</sup> Context includes all kinds of relational settings including social scenes and backgrounds, temporal situations, and spatially localised conditions. Accordingly, I use context to refer to social, temporal and spatial settings within which our narratives, self-experiences, communities, cultures, places, manifest. I take the *genitive* of the context to denote a person’s belonging to such (socio-spatio-temporal) settings, the core aspects of her life (story, experience, community, culture, place) included.<sup>26</sup>

The genitive of the context precedes the genitive of the object, as the genitive of the object precedes the genitive of the subject. Why? Consider Amo. With his removal from Africa to Europe core aspects of his life were given a completely new meaning. His short narrative was changed, or rather wiped out and started anew; he was given another name in a different community and culture in a foreign place. In

25 See the Webster’s dictionary.

26 Admittedly, we could also use the term “place” instead of “context” as far as both concepts could be taken to refer to what Husserl, and following him, Janz and Malpas, call the “life world”. I use the term “context” here for technical reasons in order to distinguish myself from Janz’s and Malpas’s concepts of place. Much as I appreciate their concepts of place, between us there are some subtle but decisive differences. First of all, context qua genitive of the context emphasises the way a context, or for that matter, a place, involves and directs our human existence independent of our own choices. The phenomenological tradition, which Janz and Malpas follow, is focused on how humans are directed to place qua world and unfold their possibilities of choice bound to the world. My focus is inversely on the way humans are primarily directed by the world, often in such a way that they are bereft of possibilities of their own choice, as demonstrated by the case of Amo above and below. Secondly, often people such as Amo, so I argue, are displaced in a place such that place offers no space of belonging or dwelling. The term place qua space of belonging, as Janz and Malpas use the term, does not sufficiently account for such displacement - as pointed out above with the example of Amo. The genitive of the context, so I argue below, shows how vulnerable humans can be to uninhabitable places. Thirdly, place, as Janz and Malpas employ the term, refers to place most basically as universal, a priori condition of human existence rather than a particular environment. Context refers to a place in its social, historical, and geographical particularity. Placial identity refers to the fact that humans inevitably and universally belong to place as their abode; contextual identity refers to their being subject to different places which might or might not offer them a space of belonging. Placial identity as viewed by Janz and Malpas, assumes that, despite differences and tensions, we all have a place of belonging and being together; contextual identity resists the assumption of a core identity, as I argue in this section, and suggests an identity grounded by a particularity of places, of which some might tell where we belong, or are at home, while others might show the contrary, a state of homelessness, as the case of Amo demonstrates.

short, the genitive of the context ascribed to him a new identity. He belonged to a new context and so every aspect of his life changed. The genitive of the context thus overrode the genitive of the object, and all aspects of his life, his story, experiences, community, culture, place, were overruled. Subsequently he had to learn to identify himself anew from within the aspects attributed to his life. He had to, as it were, recharge the genitive of the subject. This posed a major challenge, for Amo had to learn the meaning of the ambivalence of belonging. He had to learn to identify with his new family, but as its Moor; similarly he was an honoured part of the academic community but as a “genuine Negro”. In short, he was to be Anton Amo Afer. Amo’s case demonstrates how a context directs or redirects the meaning of core aspects of our lives (our stories, experiences, etc.) independent of our choice. We are always bound to contexts and what we identify as core aspects of our lives (stories, experiences, communities, cultures, places) are set to develop all kinds of meanings from within the context of particular social relationships, historical circumstances, and geographical conditions.

But this is not all we learn from Amo’s case. We also learn that we have the option to identify with aspects of our lives imposed by its context in a way we can choose. Amo learnt to be a scholar of the Enlightenment, to take the freedom to think independently, to make choices about how to take or not to take the meaning of things. The context of the Enlightenment taught him to advocate freedom, fraternity and equality, to protest against oppression, discrimination and racism, and he did so by means of writings of his own choice. The very context imposed on him taught him that contexts are open to choice, but also that they are vulnerable to change, that they offer chances and possibilities, that we are, after all, free enough to make some choices. Thus without having any choice he learnt the freedom of choice.

Contextual belonging seems to give an ambivalent nature to identity. Contextual identity holds, on the one hand, that we learn that we are conditioned by our contexts, that inevitably we inherit the meaning of aspects of identity such as narratives, experiences, communities, cultures, places. We learn also that within our context our choices are limited. On the other hand, we learn that our conditions are open to uncertainty and change, open to be acted upon and vulnerable to interruptions. We learn, from people such as Amo, that social acts, actions that bring social change, are possible. The mere fact that we are conditioned by contexts teaches us that conditions are not deterministic but open to the vagaries of change. While we are directed by the genitive of the context and object, we also enjoy the freedom of the genitive of the subject, the freedom to change our contexts and aspects of identity that we inherit within such contexts. But social acts are limited by the openness of a society to change. Germany was not, Amo was an outsider. So while we have the freedom to act within and upon contexts, contexts will always be the primary attributor of identity.

## CONCLUSION

This paper endeavoured to show how some major concepts of identity represent what is purported to be core aspects of a person's life in the course of time, be it her narrative, self-experience, community, culture or place. As an alternative the notion of contextual identity was introduced, arguing that personal identity can be understood in terms of three genitive relations: (a) genitive of the context: our belonging to a context understood as socio-spatio-temporal setting that directs the meaning of core aspects of our lives; (b) genitive of the object: the core aspects of our lives (narratives, experiences, communities, cultures, places) by which we are contextually identified; (c) genitive of the subject: the core aspects of our lives which we identify as ours within our context of living.

The remaining question is: How should the concept of contextual identity help us understand a case such as Amo better than the other concepts discussed? Is it just the umbrella term encapsulating all the other concepts, or does it add something different?

What concepts of identity – narrative, experiential, communal, cultural, and placial – have in common, is that they typically presuppose a minimum sense of identity, a core identity. The presupposition is that there is respectively a core story, or self-experience, culture, community, or place, which we can take to be the defining fact of our identity despite changes in the course of our lives. The problem with this presupposition is that we always run into the same aporetic question as to what that core should be. Take Amo. Each of the concepts in discussion focuses on what is believed to be a core aspect of his life, yet each also leaves open questions about other aspects. It seems that we ask for too much if we search for the essential core of Amo, or a person such as Amo, since essentialist claims about his core story, or self-experience, culture, community or place seem to lead to more questions than answers. It seems that the essentialist claim of a core identity holds the danger of ending up with scepticism about identity.

But what alternative would contextual identity offer to essentialism or scepticism? Contextual identity holds that Amo is a prototype of how the meaning inherent in contexts conditions what persons are or become (genitive of the context), with respect to different aspects of their lives (genitive of the object), but also how contexts are by nature open to be changed by persons who take the freedom to shape their identity (genitive of the subject). Contextual processes independent of Amo himself would continuously condition who he was; he was to remain Anton Amo - Afer. But we can change the meaning of these processes and so remake our own stories, experiences, communities, cultures, places. Amo showed how this could be done with excellence, but he also showed the limits of his own making. Thus he showed that there is no essential Amo, neither the real one moulded by his context of living, nor an ideal one revealed by the freedom that he took to change his context. But there is a contextual identity that tells enough about Amo not to succumb to scepticism. One can identify

narrative, experiential, communal, cultural or placial aspects of someone's life, which appear to be his or her most characteristic features, within a particular context, or throughout contextual changes. In this way one can identify what a person means to others or to him- or herself, and in this sense one can tell who he or she is. One can know enough about a person, despite contextual change, not to deny personal identity. Nothing stops us from construing some or other contextual identity. Scholars would, for instance, use different contextual considerations to attribute to Amo the one or other identity; for one he is an African philosopher, for another a European scholar. However, the very contextuality of identity stops us from claiming that any of these characterisations designate the essential Amo. It is the very nature of contextuality to remain open to the meaning that aspects of a person's life might, or might not, take, from within changing contexts, and who we eventually would take him or her to be. Such contextuality continues after a person's life might be over, as long as others attribute meaning to his or her life from within other contexts. Amo today is certainly not quite the Amo of his day anymore. Today we can say Amo is no noble slave anymore, rather Germany, notably the former German Democratic Republic, would free him retrospectively. In 1965, a statue in Amo's honour was erected in Halle and his studies were published in 1968 in German and English editions in Halle by the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg. The university has also established an annual Anton Wilhelm Amo Prize. Would Amo not be happy to hear this or to identify with this Germany? We cannot know, but we know that for future Amos this is important. So perhaps we can view this as a "statue of liberty" and give his story a happy end – almost, for this is not the end of the story for people such as Amo.

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