Is 'Person' Universal?: A Review of Anthropological Perspectives on Personhood and Individual

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Abstract: This paper looks at the perceptions and transformation of social 'individual' that have been reflected in the scholarly works of anthropology. The 'individual' has been studied, in anthropology, from two different but related points of view – first, the idea of individual 'as it exists as social construct', and second individual 'as sociological problem in anthropology. Anthropological studies on the self of non-Western peoples by investigating the cultural conceptions of the self derived certain conclusions either to fit into Mauss' evolutionary scheme, or to validate the conventional debates on viewing culture as a process or a set of symbols. Since this is an area of potentially enormous scope, the focus of the paper will be refined to the understanding of the extent to which the person is a universal and to which it is a product of Western history and culture, which is an important anthropological achievement.

If there is any universal generally accepted in anthropology, it is that human beings are social animals. Unlike other disciplines such as economics, which take as their starting point the individual, anthropological analysis has focused in particular on 'the social'; in other words, the structures and practices which define group behavior. This paper will scan some of the scholarly works of anthropology that examined the transformation and relationship of 'social' 'individual'. The paper begins with a review of Marcel Mauss' legendary proposition on the evolution of personhood; as the discussion of Mauss on personhood as a sociocultural as well as Western phenomenon is of great relevance. Since this is an area of potentially enormous scope, the focus of the paper will be refined to the understanding of the extent to which the person is a universal and to which it is a product of Western history and culture, which is an important anthropological achievement.

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Mauss' Proposition and Legacy: Individual, Self and Personhood

What is a person? What is the difference between modern, Western individuals and 'tribal' *personnages*? Is there any difference? Are our terms of analysis – individual, self, person – themselves flawed and ethnocentric? The analysis of personhood as a cross-cultural phenomenon raises questions that are not easily answered, questions that propel the anthropologist, like Ulysses in his trireme, towards either the Scylla of arrogant universalism or the Charybdis of exoticizing relativism, with no safe harbour in sight. I shall nevertheless attempt to navigate a safe passage between them.

To over-extend the metaphor, I am tempted to say that Ulysses was lucky to get home to Ithaca with just a decade's misadventure. The question of personhood has been troubling anthropologists for much longer: Marcel Mauss'[i] classic essay on the category of the person (Carrithers et al. 1985, original 1938) was far from the last word on the matter. Nevertheless, it provides a good starting point for an anthropological discussion on personhood.

In this 1938 essay on personhood, Mauss traces the moral and legal evolution of conceptions of personhood 'From a simple masquerade to the mask, from a "role" (personnage) to a "person" (personne), to a name, to an individual; from the latter to a being possessing metaphysical and moral value; from a moral consciousness to a sacred being; from the latter to a fundamental form of thought and action'. Mauss takes an evolutionist perspective, finding gradual separation between the 'role' (personnage) and 'person' (personne), and eventually the formation of a 'self' (moi).

A first stage of separation, he holds, would look like Pueblo societies, where we find 'a notion of the "person" (personne) or individual, absorbed in his clan, but already detached from it in the ceremonial by the mask, his title, his rank, his role, his survival and his reappearance on earth in one of his descendants endowed with the same status, forenames, titles, rights and functions'. In this way, for the Zuni, personhood is tied up in acquired names, status and rank, goods and ceremonial objects, and in ancestral ties. Like the Zuni, the Kwakiutl acquire a new name as they embark upon a new stage of life. Names, moreover, are not only for the biological individual: 'Names are also given to: the chief's house, with its roofs, posts, doors, ornamentation,

beams, openings, double-headed and double-faced snake, the ceremonial boat, the dogs. … the dishes, the forks, the copper objects, everything is emblazoned, endowed with life, forming part of the *persona* of the owner and of the *familia*, of the *res* of his clan'. In these societies, then, one becomes a certain type of individual not so much according to what Westerners would call personality or personal decisions, but according to one's status, which is socially determined.

Mauss argues that it was with the Romans that personhood first transcended the right to take on a certain role or ritual mask and the individual was conceived of as a legal and moral entity. He writes: 'To the very end the Roman Senate thought of itself as being made up of a determinate number of *patres* representing the "persons" (personnes), the "images" of their ancestors. It is to the persona that is attributed the property of the simulacra and the imagines. Along with them the word persona, an artificial "character" (personnage), the mask and role of comedy and tragedy, of trickery and hypocrisy—a stranger to the "self" (moi)—continued on its way. Yet the personal nature of the law had been established, and persona had also become synonymous with the true nature of the individual'. To this, Latin and Greek Moralists added a moral overtone conceiving of an individual who is 'conscious, independent, free and responsible'.

According to Mauss (ibid, 1-3), the modern Western idea of the person as an autonomous, individualistic actor, is just that: an idea particular to the here and now of 20th century Europe. Even though he states that every human being has an awareness of the spiritual and physical individuality of his or her body, the Western concept of self and personhood (*person*) has evolved through a long social process: from the masquerades of the Zuni Indians and Australian aboriginals to the Greek and Roman masks and actors, to a metaphysical and moral estimation of the individual derived from Greek philosophy and Christian theology, to an individual blessed with self-awareness of himself as an autonomous actor through Calvinism and 18th and 19th century political movements and philosophers (ibid, 20-22). He concludes by saying that this particular, Western category of personhood is neither eternal nor immutable, but historically contingent and labile.

Allen, in his reading of Mauss' essay, has clarified that to Mauss, all "tribal peoples" had similar notions of person, or rather role (*personnage*): the person is seen as occupying a role, an actor defined

through his genealogically inherited place in society, the spirit of an ancestor reincarnated in his body and whose role the descendant acts out in sacred dramas (Allen 1985:29-30). Mauss, placing the emphasis on defining personhood on the public and institutional domain, emphasized the links between concepts of personhood and a society's value system, stating that even though all people had awareness of their general physical existence (ibid: 34-35), there was a real difference in how personhood and the relationship between individuals and society was constituted by various cultures.

Mauss's legacy is continued by Dumont, who uses his research on India to elaborate upon this idea of the socially determined legal and moral individual. Dumont explains that our understanding of the social individual—what he calls the 'aperception sociologique'—is the only thing we have in common with traditional societies, which lack Western values of equality and liberty, and do not possess the concept of the autonomous, independent individual. Dumont refers to Tocqueville and to show how liberal democracy, with the values of equality and liberty, has severed the chains linking the members of society to each other. In the Indian caste system, it is clear that individuals are inseparable from their social context, their social status, their ancestors, their profession, and the like. In the modern West, Dumont argues, the majority of people are only able to get a sense of this apperception when they reflect upon their interaction with collectivities with a strong sense of identity, which may include the military and political parties, or even when glimpsing the locals on sojourns abroad.

Crucially, in his discussion of Western individualism (contrasted with Indian hierarchy and holism), he distinguishes between ideology and reality, noting that no society conceived by individualism has ever existed, *as individuals live on social ideas*. Hierarchy may be an inevitable result of our social lives, but the Western artificial ideal of equality has us deny the existence of hierarchy, thereby setting up an intellectual obstacle preventing the West from easily understanding the caste system of India.

Though he does not take up the evolutionist aspect of Mauss's intellectual mission, Dumont continues to use the comparative method to inquire into the different conceptions of personhood. Indeed, he argues that it is through particular forms that we may understand universal tendencies.

Such an examination of particularity may be found in K.E. Read's 1955 essay 'Morality and the Concept of the Person among the Gahuku-Gama'. This ethnographic account examines the Gahuku-Gama people's notions of morality and personhood and compares them with those that have developed in the West, in the end corroborating the Maussian argument that traditional societies view the individual as anchored within his or her social context.

Read informs us that in Gahuku-Gama society, the ideal individual is the one that asserts him or herself proudly, strongly, insisting on the submission of others. At the same time, the person for the Gahuku-Gama is role-based, and correct behaviour is context driven. Rather than being moral equals, the moral value of a man is determined by his relational position to any other. For example, an elder brother must oversee his younger brother's wellbeing and assist him in establishing a family in exchange for respect and obedience. This leads Read to say that 'men are not primarily persons, in the moral sense, but social individuals'.

Read also looks into Gahuku-Gama views on the unique individual with his or her personality, explaining that 'the palpable differences between people, the idiosyncratic variations in their natures, are like a shimmer which overlies their social identity. They are not unaware of these variations; they do not ignore them; but they do not distinguish, as clearly as we are accustomed to, between the individual and the status which he occupies. They tend, in other words, to categorize, to see men largely in terms of their position in a system of social rights and obligations' (Read: 1955). Linking this to his legal and moral analysis of Gahuku-Gama views of personhood, Read provides us with nuanced analysis based on his own data from the field.

Similarly to Mauss, Read finds that 'the outlook of the Gahuku-Gama implies a rejection of this dualism. There is no real dichotomy between man and society, no essential separation of the individual from the social pattern'. This contrast with the Western Christian notion of the conscious, moral individual enables Read to write that this 'involves what is from the Western point of view a basic failure to distinguish an ethical category of the person. It is a failure to separate the individual from the social context and, ethically speaking, to grant him an intrinsic moral value apart from that which attaches to him as the occupant of a particular status' (ibid:). Although Read's phrasing—in particular the word 'failure'—is unfortunate, he does decry anthropological analysis

that would take from his ethnographic account the view that the Gahuku-Gama are intellectually inferior and unable to think for themselves.

Unlike Mauss and Dumont who focus on the legal and moral individual as conceived by society, Read delves into conceptions of psycho-physical personhood, determining that for the Gahuku-Gama 'the human individual is a complex biological, physiological and psychic whole'. For these people, excretions are treated as losses to the human body, and the individual personality itself. Hence the common greeting is 'let me eat your excreta' and variations that are more specific, along with gestures that physically express this. Interestingly, skin is used as a metaphor for social standing so that when one fulfils one's obligations, pays back a debt, or gives a present, one 'makes good one's skin'. When a person cuts his or her hair, relatives and age-mates mourn the loss, caking their bodies with clay and ashes and even cutting off a finger, and the newly shorn individual must 'make their skin good' by killing a pig and giving gifts.

Ultimately, Read argues that though the Gahuku-Gama do possess the category of the human individual, their notion of the person is one in which the individual, assertive and full of personality though he or she may be, is inextricable from social roles and relationships. This accords quite well with the view put forward by Mauss and Dumont. He also argues, however, that they experience individuality differently, fusing together the biological, physiological, and psychic aspects.

Furthermore, the legal and moral notion of free, conscious, equal individuals distinct from their social roles and contexts is the one that has developed in the West. This insight has implications not only for anthropology in general, which always addresses the issue of individuals and society, but also for discussions such as those on global governance and the implementation of universal human rights, which are a Western achievement dependent upon Western views of the person.

Points of Departure

Quote aside from Mauss' evolutionism, there are many problems with such a view. According to different scholars, Mauss has, unlike our Ithacan hero, managed to end up both in the jaws of Scylla *and* in the swirl of Charybdis. While Sökefeld (1999) has attacked Mauss et al for their relativism — for a too strictly bounded view of cultures with its

accompanying west vs. rest division — other anthropologists have admonished Mauss for his Western-derived universalism in separating physical self-awareness from social personhood.

Sökefeld blames earlier generations of anthropologists for maintaining a too sharp distinction between Western and non-Western selves (he talks about self and identity in favour of individual and person). According to him, they have tended to either state that the "others" have identity instead of self – a mutable, usually group-derived, external consciousness – or, more like Mauss, that the "rest" have substantially different selves than the bounded, individually derived, temporally coherent Western selves; in effect, both of these arguments deny access to what Mauss would have called *person*. According to Sökefeld, so say that one does not have a Western self in effect amounts to not having a self at all, as the westerners might argue. To qualify this statement, Sökefeld's conception of personhood is that of a multitude of shifting identities managed by a stable, continuous consciousness (self): according to him, one cannot have identities without self, without that stable point of reference. (Sökefeld 1999: 417-419) He gives an ethnographic example in his account of Ali-Hassan, a Sunni in religiously divided Pakistan visiting a marriage ceremony held by his Shi'ite relatives. Ali-Hassan carefully navigates between conflicting identities, both in terms of how he presents himself to others (at one point emphasizing himself as a dutiful relative, and at the other, a fervent Sunni, slipping between these two conflicting identities where necessary), and how he justifies his actions to himself, in rudely leaving the marriage celebration at a very early, to avoid breaking his religious obligations by eating together with his relatives (by stating that his Sunni friend had other business, and he was forced to accompany him away from the feast through no fault or choice of his own) (ibid: 420-423).

The above example clearly illustrates Sökefeld's point: actors can and do shift between identities, identities which are themselves mutable; however, there must be a self, a point of reference from which these sometimes conflicting identities are managed. He states his belief in an active self that distinguishes one individual from another – but not necessarily in the way of Mauss' *autonomous* Western person. (ibid:423-425) According to him, people everywhere have a consistency of self-representation that speaks on behalf of his universalist self-identity formulation, and he makes his loyalties clear as a processual, individual

- rather than structure-oriented anthropologist – in stating that one should look at the agency of individual selves, rather than cultural concepts of personhood (ibid, 430).

Here we slip away from the relativism – universalism debate and into another, equally eternal anthropological fracas: structure versus individual. Despite Sökefeld's insightful critique of received ideas of Western and non-Western selves, his willingness to do away with socially constituted personhood altogether (to be replaced with his idea of self) (ibid, 429) is perhaps taking things a little too far: to put too much focus on individuals and processes spurns the hard-won insights that more structurally oriented anthropological theories have delivered in terms of power relations and inequality. After all, Sökefeld's analysis sidesteps these structural issues completely. Mauss himself said that in "primitive" societies, not all individuals are *personnages,* that there aren't enough ancestral souls/masks to go around (Mauss, 1985: 9-11). It is thus important to look at who is excluded from the category of personhood.

LaFontaine (1985) expands on this idea, placing emphasis on the social constitution of authority in a given society as being the determining factor in how personhood is distributed. LaFontaine's theory debunks Mauss' unspoken assertion that 'primitive societies' are more or less alike: according to him, all societies constitute personhood and the separation between individual (as the empirical actor) and person (as a social category) in different ways, depending on how authority is reached (ibid: 124).

According to LaFontaine, in societies where power is derived from founding ancestors, personhood is only fully conferred on those who have lived a life that is fully in keeping with the moral and social norms of their culture (ibid: 139): various segments of the population are excluded. A good example of such a society would be the Tallensi. A full moral career can only be lived by a man who has been born to the right lineage, fathered legitimate children of his own, and died a good death: the essence of personhood is here in continuity; in the descendants, one has left behind; and only fully conferred after one's death. Here, the emphasis is on society, conferring personhood on those who fully shape their lives according to its values: according to LaFontaine, such societies distinguish between individuals and full persons, (ibid:131-132) and the emphasis is on social norms and reproduction, rather than individual competition. Such ideas of

personhood only exist in societies that have hierarchical organizations and socially accepted inequalities (ibid: 133). In contrast, LaFontaine mentions that in those societies where authority is not hereditary, but rather achieved through individual competition, like for the Gahuku-Gama, there is no distinction between individuals and persons, and personhood is not conferred by society on the select few (ibid: 134).

To return to Mauss' essay, LaFontaine also had a problem with Mauss' separation of awareness of one's physical autonomy from psychological social self-awareness, criticizing Mauss' separation of body and mind as Western-derived universalism (ibid: 124-126). He is not alone in this. Lienhardt, for one, wrote about the way in which Dinka self-awareness and -representation (another dig at Mauss, who had denied the "primitives" that capacity) is bodily embodied: qualities of one's personality are spoken of, in a more than metaphorical sense, as being in the body; thinking in the head, feeling in the heart; (ibid: 148-149) and their ideas of self cannot be separated from this physical dimension (ibid: 142).

Wendy James, in her monograph *The Listening Ebony* (1988) dwells at length on the composite constitution of an Uduk person: a spontaneous, urge-driven Liver controlled by a reflective, strong-willed Stomach, accompanied by a psychically sensitive Genius, given life through the vitality of the *Arum* (James 1988, 69-85). Despite these component parts, the notion of wholeness, of unity of personhood is crucial in Uduk ideas of personhood, and they have a strong sense of the moral autonomy and responsibility of individual people (ibid, 91-92) – are we, despite their anomalous body-views, to classify them as Maussian Western moderns, then? And yet, the Uduk still place a high value on social norms, and the adherence of individuals to them: generosity, concern for the community, the keeping of promises, obligations, and debts – moral censure is sure to follow where they are broken (ibid, 93). Among the Uduk, a "whole person" is both the subject and object of moral knowledge, flying in the face of the Western individual's sole possession of individual moral self-awareness and responsibility (James 1988, 144).

In fact, Uduk persons are not constituted in accordance with any Maussian scheme of actors. Even though the Uduk do have a concept of socially constituted personhood, it is not exclusive, and would not be best described as a status conferred on the passive individual by a hierarchical society. In fact, Uduk persons are, according to Wendy

James, "built" through a series of rites of passage aimed at
strengthening their various parts (Stomach, Genius, *Arum*) while at the
same time protecting them from harm with various protective rites
(ibid, 97). Thus, the aim is to mature the person in a controlled manner
(ibid: 107) by disciplining the Liver and training the Stomach through
controlling one's diet, and protecting the still underdeveloped Genius
from harm (ibid, 108). A person's life cycle is fulfilled at death, as his or
her *Arum* detaches from the body, and goes to live in the Underworld
(ibid, 126).

Wendy James, in examining the Uduk of Sudan, is more interested in
the person as an experiencing subject than personhood as the
conventional category which Mauss was examining in his essay (ibid,
144). In this, she is not alone. Quite apart from Sökefeld's process- and
individual-oriented view of selfhood, the Comaroffs, in studying the
Tswana of South Africa, have found a view of personhood broadly
similar to the Uduk's. Here, as among the Uduk, we find a highly
individual world (Comaroff, J.L. and Comaroff, J. 2001: 267-269) where
persons are seen as works in progress: people accomplish personhood
through ongoing practical activities rather than genealogical inheritance.
It is a socially fluid world where men build up themselves through
gathering status and affluence, competing against each other, constantly
threatening to 'eat' up their lessers, but differing from the Uduk, slaves
and women are to an extent excluded from full personhood (ibid: 271-
272). The Tswanan person is a work in progress, an active agent for
whom the social, the self and unceasing labour constitute each other in
a continual process (ibid: 276). Even though this scheme does not
neatly fit with Mauss' vision of society, one is tempted to compare it
with LaFontaine's: here, in a highly competitive society, personhood is
up for grabs for everyone (who is allowed to participate in that
competition, anyway).

Where does this cross-cultural voyage over the troubled sea of
personhood leave us? Mauss' categories may have been thoroughly
debunked, but LaFontaine's division of personhood according to the
source social/moral authority seems to be holding up fairly well. The
Uduk, for example, are a fairly egalitarian people who used to be, and
still to some degree think of themselves as hunters. This mode or
organization and the fact that they do not strictly separate between
individuals and persons; or set up personhood as an exclusive category
would appear to fit LaFontaine's view of the lack of seperation between

individuals and persons in competitive, fluid societies. However, the bone of contention between him and Sökefeld and James is not one of conflicting views, but rather of interests: Sökefeld and James are interested in a more processual, individual-oriented view of personhood, while LaFontaine has – in altered form – salvaged from the debris of Mauss' trireme a different structural scheme for the categories of personhood. While the former are certainly justified in taking an approach that stresses the agency of individuals, it would be tragic to abandon completely the structural study of power relations, of exclusion and inclusion, in the study of personhood: the Comaroffs come closest to incorporating the two perspectives.

If we are to learn from the contrasts that Mauss draws between primitive societies and modernised societies, we must also acknowledge the errant evolutionist aspect of Mauss's essay. This noted, Mauss's distinction between the categories of person (personne), self (moi), and role (personage) is a helpful start, as it facilitates in the delineation of those notions that the Western world has developed.

Besides these textual and theoretical understandings of self, some scholars attempted to explain individual in terms of action and agency. Harris (1989), in a similar fashion like Mauss, refers to the concept of self as conceptualization of the human being and a locus of experience of human's oneness, which can be understood both as subject and object. She notes that the self becomes subject when it behaves consciously to distinguish from other's self. The self as object, by which humans become self-aware, is cognized and recognized as distinct from all other objects in the world, with a set of beliefs about itself. It may experience itself as a unique unity, achieving a sense of personal identity. In the psychologized view of the West, reflexive awareness of the individual is seen as yielding a duality of self. For Harris, an individual as a single member of the human kind is different from persons, the latter is viewed as agents-in-society (ibid 602-5). For personhood, Harris gives specific importance on being an agent-in-society whose actions are purposively directed toward a goal and to have a certain standing in a social order (ibid). In doing so, instead of exploring the colossal texture of societal rules, everyday practice and smaller spaces have been studied by scholars to examine individual agency.

Beginning from Irving Goffman's seminal *Presentation of the self in everyday life* (1959), which examines the diverse frameworks individuals use to

locate and construct themselves as social subjects, the everyday has been understood as a space of contradictions that help us unfold the ways in which social norms are materialized or contested or both by individual subjects. Foucault and Bourdieu remain most influential figures in developing 'practice theory' and current anthropological debates on the power/agency problem. Michel de Certeau's *The practice of everyday life* (1984), one of the most popular and influential illustrations of such an approach, reconceptualizes agency as a tactical deployment of power. He draws attention to the creative poetics of the "common man" in their respective forms of living life and improvising norms, in consumption, thus locates micro-positioning of power in daily enactments and negotiations. At the same time, for de Certeau, strategies of everyday resistance to power rely on existing but non-dominant repertoires of action, such as folk-tales, myths, epic legends, and games. De Certeau's account of the everyday thereby foregrounds creativity and resistance while simultaneously carving them within, rather than dislocating them from existing norms and values. While a number of other scholarly works (e.g. Scott 1990), have been focusing on such understanding of individual in relation to power, Comaroff (1985) warns us that despite the individual agency, presence and operation of power and macro-politics are overwhelming, leaving little room for individuals.

Individual and Society: Anthropological Perspectives

In recent decades, anthropological interest has enjoyed a boom as a great deal of debates centred on the formation of 'independent' selves in 'individualist' cultures versus 'interdependent' selves in collectivist cultures. Much of the arguments take a position against the Durkheimian proposition of 'social' self, however. For example, Mines' (1988) study of individuals in Indian society, presents a sharp contrast to Dumont's view of individual's embeddedness in society and caste system. Rather Mines shows that instead of complete subordination of the individual to caste and family and the compelling influence of hierarchy for explaining motivations for behaviour, the individuals are engaged in constant process of negotiation and rebellion to realise their goals that do not fit within the social expectations and role model more individual. Mines identifies that rebellion against family and caste is quite usual, and deviations from the etiquette of hierarchy are quite frequent.

Instead of perception and social order, actions and responses are much emphasized by Harris (1989) to explain individual agency. She argues that all societies have a concept of the living human as agent-in-society and action plays the central role in formation of personhood. Considering anyone an agent, the person creates space for some degree of freedom to choose among possible lines of action, even though the extent of freedom may be small (Harris 1989: 603). However, the emphasis is that, as with understanding, freedom must be on the shared, public aspect of accountability, which means being liable to sanctions. Accountability and liability, like mutual construal, show the person as agent within a sociomoral order. This is a key point, for a large part of the description and comparison of concepts of the person must focus on publicly bestowed, imputed, and enunciated agentive capacities of persons, and on the relations among those capacities. (ibid: 603). Harris argues that in order to become social agents, the persons living in a moral order are performing actions and responding to each other's actions. As the socio-moral orders are dynamic, movements and vocalizings are constantly subjected to a public process of construal, which is carried out according to culture-specific criteria of logic, factuality, standards of evidence, values, and labels, that is, to rules in a very broad sense. There is a process of analyzing, interpreting, and labelling of conduct so as to generate a stream of public discourse about agency and non-agency.

Nevertheless, Harris' arguments obviously lead to 'habitus'- the central concept of Bourdieu's theory of practice, referring to a "strategy-generating principle" (Bourdieu 1977: 72) which shapes the way in which actors respond to situations and improvise strategies to deal with them. It is a set of durable dispositions shared by a certain group or social class, shaped by the objective economical and political circumstances of said group. It operates through expectation of the objective possibilities for action, but in an unrecognized – or in fact misrecognized – manner. Thus, one is more or less automatically aware of what is appropriate or inappropriate to say or do in a given situation (ibid: 76), and this appropriateness is taken for granted, and unquestioned. Furthermore, Bourdieu is very emphatic about the habitus not being a set of given rules for any situation (as there would need to be an infinite number of such rules), but rather, in a manner that seems somewhat reminiscent of Chomsky (whom Bourdieu dislikes), treats the habitus as a set of principles capable of generating an infinite number of appropriate strategies (Jenkins 1992: 71).

To further explain the somewhat arcane notion of "expectations"
implied in the concept of the habitus, Bourdieu means by this that the
subjective aspirations of actors of a certain class or group are linked to
the objective constraints of their economic and social environment
through the mediating mechanism of the habitus. Thanks to its
operation, they will subjectively discount as unthinkable or
inappropriate those aspirations that are objectively impossible for them
to achieve ("that's not for the likes of us"). Or, more insidiously, the
constraints upon, say, the working class in receiving education or
getting white collar jobs are denied by double negation, "making virtue
of necessity" and thus valorizing their inequality. Paul Willis' *Learning to
Labour* (1979) is one example of the latter, asserting that the working
class reproduces itself by the actors devaluing the means of social
mobility (education) and placing positive value on some of the
strategies that lead to their own subordination.

Gananath Obeysekere (1990), taking different mode of analysis, notes
that individual's developmental use of cultural symbol systems to
transform and give new meanings to deep motivations. An individual's
cultural heritage provide numerous route by which core features of
personality can be transformed into public performances, life projects,
and identities. And however strongly authorities attempt to impose
these, individuals retain an important degree of latitude to improvise
and create.

Interesting enough, Maussian notion of 'self' as Western notion also
prevailed in latter anthropological scholarship. Geertz (1983) in his
discussion of the Moroccan 'mosaic' self, described the Western
conception of person as a 'bounded, unique, more or less integrated
motivational and cognitive universe- a dynamic centre of awareness,
emotion, judgment' which he found to be a 'peculiar' idea in non-
western cultures. In a similar vein, Shweder and Bourne (1984) examine
individual-social relationship based on Western and non-Western
divisions of conceptualizations. In their view, modern Western societies
constitute the 'egocentric contractual' individual-social relationship
while many non-Western societies conceptualize the individual-social
relationship as 'socio-centric organic'. Living by a 'holistic world view'
such societies hold that "objects and events are necessarily altered by
the relations into which they enter ..." This categorization follows, by
and large, Durkheimian division of mechanical versus organic solidarity.
Correspondingly, the "person" is conceptualized as context-dependent,

his characteristics describable only by specifying the social context in which they appear (Shweder and Bourne 1984:193). Markus and Kitayama (1991) combined these two models – on the hand, they, following Geertz, suggested that Western independent selves have solid boundaries separating them from others whereas Asian interdependent selves have permeable boundaries that enmesh them in social relationships. In the same article they proposed a 'repertoire of schemata' model of self, according to which people in all cultures have independent and interdependent self-schemas but cultures differ in which they frequently elicit.

Nevertheless, there have been sharp criticisms to this West versus non-West dichotomy of individual–social relationship. Robert LeVine (1990) found this notion quite similar with the ethnocentric view of evolutionary thought that argued that Western civilization evolved to a higher level than 'primitive' cultures by hatching the autonomous individual from its long incubating immersion in kinship relations. Spiro(1993) criticized the notion that a culture's social etiquettes or 'concept of personhood' reflects the selves of its members and insisted that individuals often don't think of themselves –in the ways their culture prescribes; so that it is possible for few or even no members of a culture develop selves congruent with their culture's construction of self . Citing examples of Buddhists in Burma, he argues that though the idea of 'individual soul' is absent in Buddhist doctrine, people in rural areas have their own perception of self since the doctrinal 'selflessness' is too abstract for them to live with. Leach, also recognized this individual space within a system as he argued 'all viable systems there must be an area where the individual is free to make choices so as to manipulate the system to his own advantage' (Leach 1962:133). Spiro also noted that, the leading Western theorists of self –William James, G.H Mead and Erik Erikson –all propose thoroughly sociocentric models. Whereas James distinguished the 'empirical' self that includes the "material," the "social," and the "spiritual" selves-from "the pure ego" (the "I"), Mead firmly maintains that 'selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves' (Spiro 1993: 137-138).

The scholars who challenge this Western vs. non-Western dichotomy, begin with a basic premise that 'West' is not a homogeneous phenomena, neither the 'non-West' is. Bernstein (1964) drawing attention to class differentiation in socialization patterns, suggested that whereas in middle-class families the autonomy and unique value of the

individual is given emphasis, in working class families there is little reflection on the notion of the self. In the latter context, appeal is made to social role categories, and socialization is associated with a restricted rather than an elaborated speech code.

Finally, the western conception of the person has therefore to be situated in analysis that recognised the cultural hegemony of capitalism and of bourgeois modes of thought, and their intrinsic androcentric bias too. Much of the anthropological writings have bewailed the fact that there has been an intrinsic androcentric bias and the concepts of rationality and the persons described in the scholarship are not gender-neutral. Stressing the feminist ontology, Jane Flax (1983) was more accurate in asserting that gender divisions too subsist in self-conceptions.

Conclusion

The variability of personhood in no way could be translated as a contingency of individuality, therefore, whereby one may somehow consider people living unselfconsciously, "amid various unconscious systems of determining forces" (Rabinow 1977:151). The ascription of the 'western notion of dignity and social value onto the 'person'— may and should be a variable, which requires cultural, historical and political investigation instead of taking individuality and personhood as universally and ubiquitously present. This not only an argument to fan the debate on the origin and prevalence of 'the cult of the individual' in contradistinction to the hierarchy of the collectivity (Dumont 1986), nor the comparison concerning the forms of local representation of the person (cf. Carrithers 1985). I argue for the necessity of a social-scientific approach that will make us well-equipped to investigate people's patterns of thinking.

The 'individual' has been studied, in anthropology, from two different but related points of view – first, the idea of 'individual' as it exists as social construct, and second 'individual' as sociological problem in anthropology. Anthropological studies on the self of non-Western peoples by investigating the cultural conceptions of the self derived certain conclusions either to fit into the Mauss' evolutionary scheme, or to validate the conventional debates on viewing culture as a process or a set of symbols. The way Maussian legacy defined *individuality*, however, refers to individualism, which is the culmination of a

particular historic-cultural conceptualization of the person. In that way, the social actor becomes extravagantly and conventionally 'distinct', sovereign and autonomous. The conclusions drawn from these studies propagate some isomorphic and conceited relationships among cultural conceptions of the 'self', self-conceptions of social actors, and self-representations of the actors. By and large, only two types of self and self-conceptions (and often self-representations), a Western and a non-Western, and that compared to the latter, which obviously has many more exemplars; the former is 'peculiar' are evident in these studies. In this heavily inter connected global world and social settings, I would like to conclude, the traditional 'primitive' who is not self-critical and not aware of the self but living an unquestioned collective life with others remaining incapable of a sophisticated and conscious elucidation of his cultural practices and social institutions, does not exist (cf. Shweder 1991:14). Such stance is as unfeasible as the post-structuralist 'person' who is simply 'the effect' of a position assigned him or her by historical-cultural discourses.

Instead, I presume the universality of the person as the culmination of agency, consciousness, interpretation and creativity in social and cultural life; which by virtue of his or her exclusive awareness of discrete, bodily, sense-making device result in individuality. Perception of the 'self' bounds the (otherwise permeable) individual human body, and is itself a manifestation of that 'unique embodiment': of the individuality of the being and the becoming of each individual body. Certainly these manifestations are framed in collective enclosures of gender, religion, class, race and ethnicity, but there are always individuals who, no matter what, have an effect on their own meaningful perspectives on and interpretations of the world. Ethnographic studies, if conducted beyond the western epistemological and ontological legacy, must demonstrate the fact that while it seems that the person exists as a universal category *for* experience, there exists a variety of ways that this category may be experienced. Each individual constitute the enterprise and the consciousness, to devise a personal system or systems of mental constructs, his or her criteria of improvisation, in terms of which people and events come to be construed, experienced and projected, even within the collective frames. The personal frames help each individual actively reach out to the world and place certain meanings upon it. These meanings of the world will accumulate, multiply, develop, change and contradict one another, but the incessant initiatives remain with the person.

This position, therefore, also calls for a methodological prudence. Individual subject, as it is unfolded in anthropological scholarship, is both the 'selves' of the respondents and of the investigator, and certainly there exists correlation between the two. In contemporary scholarship, there are laudable methodological notes on subjectivity in anthropological study, which should lay the ground for ethnographic exploration of the 'self' of the investigator too and to examine the extent to which 'this investigator self' can study respondent 'self' as unmediated one. Finally, and paradoxically, in this way, the individual subject becomes the main subject of his own personal constructions.

Notes

i Mauss's essay was given in French as the Huxley Memorial Lecture for 1 938, and appeared under the title 'Une Categorie de l'Esprit Humain: La Notion de Personne, Celle de "Moi" , in the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 68 (1 938). (It was reprinted in Mauss's Sociologie et anthropologie [Paris, 1 950] - with some printing errors.) A translation by Ben Brewster was published in Marcel Mauss: Sociology and Psychology (London, 1 979). The translation by W.D. Halls was commissioned for Carrithers (1985) with the permission of Routledge and KeganPaul PLe.(Carrithers 1985)

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