

# African Communitarian Philosophy of Personhood and Disability

## The Asymmetry of Value and Power in Access to Healthcare

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this essay, I explore the asymmetry of value and power inherent in African communitarian philosophy's assumptions about personhood and the implications of these assumptions for disabled people's access to healthcare in the COVID-19 pandemic era. While African communitarian philosophy forms the fulcrum on which people in an African community thrive and survive, it is also essentially laden with an ontology of exclusion that prioritizes some people as persons over other people who are cast as non-persons. Disabled people – including persons with albinism, autistic people, persons with epilepsy, and persons with angular kyphosis – are excluded as non-persons in this way and are thus unable to enjoy the support of the communitarian structure. In pursuance of the objective of this essay, I begin with an exposition of the nature and contents of African communitarian philosophy. I proceed to analyse the conception of personhood deeply rooted in African philosophy and, by implication, the exclusion of certain beings and persons from the African communitarian philosophical structure. I then show the privileges in terms of value and power that people included within the community of selves enjoy as opposed to the disvalue and lack of power that those excluded from this community face. I show furthermore how this devaluation and disempowerment can become major challenges to wellbeing and healthcare for disabled people, particularly hindering

access to healthcare even during a pandemic. I conclude by arguing for the importance of a broad sense of community in African philosophy rather than the narrow sense of community that is currently in place.

## KEYWORDS

African, communitarian philosophy, ontology of exclusion, narrow sense of community, broad sense of community

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## Introduction

Debates about disability almost immediately direct our attention to questions of value and power. In particular, debates about disability and disabled people often revolve around questions about the intrinsic worth and value of disabled people, questions that are woven into the fabric of human societies, and questions that ask how deeply rooted, traditional, and stereotypical value systems and structures that affect disabled people can be deconstructed, uprooted (as it were), and properly replanted. These questions about the value of disabled people in turn usually imply the asymmetry and imbalance of power, the politics inherent in power structures, the harm that they cause to disabled people, and how this power imbalance can be addressed. What is ubiquitous today is the fact that disabled people have to battle against asymmetries of power within societies to be recognized as people who should be valued and who have worth. As I have argued (Imafidon, 2020, p. 248):

*To earn self-worth . . . [for the disabled] means to take what was not initially given, to say to the society: "I am more of a person than you think I am or you say I am." It is a forceful, deliberate, and active exercise engaged in both through words, action, and inaction to prove that one is worth more and much more valuable than the social group in which one dwells considers such a person to be. Earned self-worth is also what one compels the society to accept about one's personhood through an overriding of the status quo on the nature of one's personhood in a given society.*

We can observe the same interplay between value and power in healthcare, broadly speaking. Of particular interest in the context of discourse on healthcare is the allocation of "scarce" resource in healthcare delivery. For example, the distribution of scarce COVID-19 vaccines is done on the basis of the answers provided to questions related to value and power. Questions about who deserves to get the scarce vaccines first, about the criteria for vaccine allocation, and other questions about the allocation of vaccines are primarily questions about value and power. Frontline health workers seem to have more worth and value with respect to COVID-19 vaccination than teenagers in high schools; elderly people seem to have less physiological power to withstand the potential outcomes of the virus than either of these groups. So, who should be given priority of access to the vaccines?

Questions about the importance of value and power in disability and health-related discourses emerge from a much more primordial issue: from taken-for-granted assumptions about personhood. Yet notions of personhood should not be taken for granted but rather recognized

as theoretical constructs. Recognition of the ways in which representations of personhood are entrenched into societies is vital for an understanding of who has value and worth in a given society and the asymmetries of power that determine these standards. In this essay, therefore, I showcase asymmetries of value and power embedded in the communitarian philosophy of personhood of African thought and the implications of these asymmetries for disabled people, especially with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic. My intention is to show that, while African communitarian philosophy forms the fulcrum on which people in an African community thrive and survive, it is also essentially laden with an ontology of exclusion that prioritizes some people as persons over other people who are cast as non-persons. Disabled people – including people with albinism, autistic people, people with epilepsy, and people with angular kyphosis – are among the people who are excluded as non-persons within this ontology and who are thus unable to enjoy the support of the communitarian structure. In the first section, I present an exposition of the nature and contents of African communitarian philosophy, in order to provide an essential background for my discussion. I proceed by analysing the conception of personhood deeply rooted in African thought and, by implication, consider how beings and persons are excluded from the communitarian structure that permeates African societies. I point out the differential privileges in terms of value and power that persons included within the community of selves enjoy in contrast to the lack of value and power conferred upon those who are excluded. I show, furthermore, how these asymmetries of privilege, value, and power are a major challenge to wellbeing and equity in healthcare for disabled people, particularly hindering access to healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. I conclude by explicating two senses of community in African thought – a narrow sense and a broad sense – and I argue for the importance of pursuing the broad sense of community in African philosophy rather than the narrow sense of community that is currently assumed.

## African Communitarian Philosophy

African communitarian philosophy – as a political, moral, ontological, and existential philosophy – has been defended by African scholars as a unique and authentic African philosophy that defines the African way of life and forms the basis for African identity, as well as distinguishes African cultures from other (mostly) liberal, non-African cultures. In the words of Michael O. Eze, “African communitarianism as a discursive formation between the individual and the community . . . is a view which eschews the dominant position of many Africanist scholars on the primacy of the community over the individual” (2008, p. 386). John Mbiti provides a classical description of African communitarian philosophy thus:

*Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and relatives whether dead or alive. Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.” This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man. (1969, pp. 108–109)*

Desmond Tutu adds that “Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good.” (1999, p. 35). Kwame Gyekye explains that African communitarian philosophy implies,

*(i) that the human person does not voluntarily choose to enter into human community, that is, the community life is not optional for any individual person; (ii) that the human person is at once a cultural being; (iii) that the human person cannot – perhaps, must not – live in isolation from other persons; (iv) that the human person is naturally oriented towards other persons and must have relationship with them; (v) that social relationships are not contingent but necessary; and (vi) that, following from (iv) and (v), the person is constituted, but only partly . . . , by social relationships in which he finds himself. (1992, p. 104)*

Several other scholars share the same perspective of the importance of communal living in African cultures. For example, we find these views in the works of Gyekye (1996), Gbadagesin (1998), Menkiti (2004), Ikuenobe (2006), Oyeshile (2006), Nel (2008), Aigbodioh (2011), and Imafidon (2011, 2012).

At the ontological level, African communitarian philosophy comprises the African understanding of being or reality, of its structure, of what is and what is not, and of how each individual being is responsible for, and obligated to, ensure, sustain, and maximize communal harmony, order, equilibrium, and wellbeing of all other beings. Polycarp Ikuenobe aptly explains this thus:

*In the traditional African view, reality or nature is a continuum and a harmonious composite of various elements and forces. Human beings are a harmonious part of this composite reality, which is fundamentally, a set of mobile life forces. Natural objects and reality are interlocking forces. Reality always seeks to maintain an equilibrium among the network of elements and life forces. . . . Because reality or nature is a continuum, there is no conceptual or interactive gap between the human self, community, the dead, spiritual or metaphysical entities and the phenomenal world; they are interrelated, they interact, and in some sense, one is an extension of the other. (2006, pp. 63–64)*

He adds that,

*This idea of harmony or the goal of maintaining harmony for the human good and well-being is the foundation for communalism, which implies the need to impose social responsibilities on people in order to rationally perpetuate the relevant traditions and maintain harmony. So, maintaining harmony with the aid of the community is an essential human interest. The idea of pursuing and maintaining human welfare and interests is at the moral centre of communalism and the moral conception of personhood in African traditions. . . . As such, communalism prescribes that people should act in a way that would enhance their own interest within the framework of pursuing the goal of human well-being and welfare in the context of natural harmony in their communities. (p. 65)*

In other words, it becomes imperative within African communities to act in ways that preserve and promote order in the communal structure since this preservation and promotion of order are the ways in which individual beings – human or non-human – gain relevance, can pursue interests, and ensure survival.

The value and pride that many African scholars have for African communitarian philosophy is evident in the way that they have applied it as a theoretical framework for resolving issues, challenges, and problems in different spheres of life in Africa and around the globe, including environmental problems, business problems, governance issues, health-care challenges such as the distribution of health care resources during the COVID-19 pandemic, and so on. For example, African environmental ethicists argue for an African relational environmental ethics on the basis of African communitarianism. According to this view, the environment is an essential part of the structure of being and we have obligations to care for it. Several scholars of African thought provide numerous examples of how the environment is intrinsically linked to other beings and should be treated and cared for as vital for the community's wellbeing and survival (see Behrens, 2013; and Chemhuru, 2013). Other scholars have applied African thought to business situations by theorising the ways that arguments in business ethics can be deduced from African communitarian philosophy. In complex or complicated business situations, for example, African communitarian ethics could, as Douglas F. P. Taylor (2014) argues, become the basis for decision-making, focusing on such questions as: Does the business action promote cohesion among parties? Does the action promote or acknowledge reciprocal value between the parties? Does the action damage relationship with the various parties? These African communitarian ethics-based questions would help meaningful decision-making in such business situations. In the area of healthcare, some African healthcare professionals have also discussed in detail how the relational, solidaristic, and the care-for-one-another or live-and-let's-live elements of African communitarian ethics can improve relationships between healthcare workers and patients, providing the basis for better healthcare for persons with HIV/AIDS, mental illnesses, and other forms of disability (see, e.g., Dawning & Hastings-Tolsma, 2016). Indeed, the framework of African communitarian ethics is now widely used to resolve governance issues (e.g., Nzimakwe, 2014), gender issues (e.g., Chisale, 2018), and other social and political issues throughout the African continent. In short, African communitarian philosophy has become a rich and reliable theoretical resource for African scholars.

However, African communitarian philosophy has not been uncritically and wholly accepted in African scholarship and research; there has been critical discourse about its flaws and limitations. For instance, Kwasi Wiredu (1980) has argued that African communitarian structure has the tendency to become authoritarian, overriding individual will and autonomy, and, consequently, becoming anachronistic and hindering individual contribution to community/societal development. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) and Didier Kaphagawani (1988) share this view. These disagreements about African communitarian philosophy are important and have led to heated debates among scholars, as well as to the formulation of moderate and radical perspectives of African communitarianism, where the former appeals to many scholars because it leaves room for individual freedom and autonomy and the latter is rejected by many scholars for its failure to do so (see Oyeshile, 2006).

In the following section, I examine the conception of personhood that is deeply entrenched in African communitarian philosophy and consider how this conception evinces the asymmetries of value and power that continue to exist between people in African communities, asymmetries between people based on the extent to which they either fit or do not fit within the dominant understanding of personhood that pertains in these communities.

## African Conception of Personhood and the Ontology of Exclusion

It is important to begin this section by clarifying how I use an African conception of personhood and conceive the ontology of exclusion from which it originates. In African communitarian philosophy, personhood is attributed to both human beings and non-human beings. Non-human beings who may have some form of personhood status include ancestors and revered or totemic animals and aspects of the natural environment such as lakes or certain trees – the revered animals or things would vary from one indigenous community or culture to another. How these non-human beings attain personhood and the nature of their being as persons is not of immediate concern to my discussion in this article. Hence, I will not discuss in what follows how, in an African ontology, the notion of personhood is more comprehensive than it is on dominant Western accounts. The being for whom personhood is in question in the context of this article is the human being. For the purposes of this article, I am concerned with an ontology of exclusion that distinguishes between human beings rather than a notion of exclusion that relies upon the accepted categories of beings in African ontology and the ontologically legitimated dispositions toward entities of the other-than-being categories.

The African conception of personhood, as it relates to the human being, answers two interrelated questions: Who is a human being? What features must a human being possess to be a person? These questions and the theories formulated about them in African philosophy often take the form “A person is a human being with x and y qualities.” It is in the articulation of what these x and y qualities are that an African conception of personhood can be located. These x and y qualities, as articulated in African cultures, can be grouped broadly into ontic and social/normative qualities. The ontic features or qualities of a human being that are essential for personhood consist of the material and immaterial constituents of a human being, including life force, physical head and inner head (destiny), spirit, literal physical heart, and figurative or inner heart. Personhood, in Yoruba philosophy, also comprises the process of coming into being, including the idea that children come into being as blessings from ancestors, deities, and the Supreme Being and, furthermore, that these superior non-human entities are the source of both the material and immaterial components of the human being. For example, Kwame Appiah provides a summary of the ontic features of a person as theorized by the Akan people of Ghana:

*a person consists of a body (nipadua) made from the blood of the mother (the mogya); an individual spirit, the sunsum, which is the main bearer of one's personality; and a third entity, the okra. The sunsum derives from the father at conception. The okra, a sort of life force that departs from the body only at the person's last breath; is sometimes as*

*with the Greeks and the Hebrews, identified with breath; and is often said to be sent to a person at birth, as the bearer of ones nkrabea, or destiny, from Nyame. The sunsum, unlike the okra, may leave the body during life and does so, for example, in sleep, dreams being thought to be the perceptions of a person's sunsum on its nightly peregrinations . . . (Appiah, 2004, p. 28)*

Among the Yoruba people, the ontic components of the human being consist of the *ara* (body), *emi* (vital principle), and *ori* (destiny). The Yoruba believe that it is *ori* that rules, controls, and guides the life and activities of the person. The *ori*, as the essence of a person, derives from *Olodumare* (Supreme Being). (Oyeshile, 2006, see also Imafidon, 2012). The *ara* is a collective term for all the material components of a person, the most important of which for the Yoruba are *opolo* (the brain), *okan* (the heart), and *ifun* (the intestine). Both *opolo* and *okan* are regarded by the Yoruba as having some connections with human conscious activities such as thinking and feeling. *Opolo* is regarded by the Yoruba as having connections with “sanity” and “intelligence.” Thus, when a person is “insane,” the Yoruba say “*Opolo re ko pe*” (his brain is not complete or not in order). “*Okan*, (physical heart) which, apart from being closely connected with blood, is also regarded as the seat of emotion and psychic energy. A person who is courageous is said to ‘have a heart’ (*oni okan*)” (Oladupo, 1992).

The importance of these ontic features for personhood is clearly seen in the exclusion of disabled people as other-than-(human)being due to their (perceived) “lack” of some of these features and why they emerged without them. For example, the process of coming into being for disabled persons is theorized in African thought as largely different from the process of coming into being of nondisabled human beings. Disabled persons are seen in many African communities as resulting from the curse, anger, or error of divinities, deities, and ancestors due to wrongdoings of humans. For example, in Yoruba philosophy, disabled persons are the product of the error of the divinity *Orisa-nla* who *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being) put in charge of forming the body. This error could be deliberate or non-deliberate: deliberately, either as a measure with which *Orisa-nla* can punish members of the human community who have erred in some way or as way for this divinity to showcase his ability to create something different; or non-deliberately, for instance, if, as according to some of narratives, he had become drunk on one of his creative days and forged or created disabled bodies. In either case, in Yoruba thought, disabled persons are thus seen as exclusive properties of the divinity, *Orisa-nla*, which explains the following: during divination, a diviner would pay homage to a disabled person, disabled people are often regarded as belonging to the shrines of the divinity, and disabled people are often regarded as possessing some forms of supernatural powers (see Adegbindin, 2018). In many Eastern African communities such as in Tanzania and Malawi, disabled persons are perceived as non-human, the bodily manifestation of a curse by ancestors, deities, and divinities. Therefore, in many African communities, disabled persons would not become an ancestor since only human beings who have the ontic and social features of being a person can enter the ancestral cult after death.

The social or normative features or qualities essential for human beings to have in order to attain personhood comprise taught attitudes, values, dispositions, and behaviors that promote the much-cherished communal harmony and equilibrium among beings in the community. Actions that cause discord and threaten harmony and togetherness are

frowned upon. Furthermore, people who persistently act in a manner that threatens togetherness and harmony of the community of beings and even develop a disposition to act in this way become regarded not as persons at least in the normative sense. Hence a morally bankrupt person who persistently and consistently fails to live by the community's sense of morality can come to be regarded as an entity that does not act as a person and thus be ostracized or excluded from the community (see Wiredu, 1992). An important point to note, however, is that neither the ontic nor the social qualities of personhood can independently or solely guarantee personhood for a human being. A disabled person, for example, may live a life that is accepted by the community, both persistently and consistently, and still not be regarded as a person because she "lacks" the requisite ontic features. Similarly, a nondisabled person who possesses all the ontic features of personhood will not be considered a person if they fail to lead a community-accepted lifestyle. Hence, to be a person, in an African community, is to possess both the ontic and normative qualities required for being so.

### **Implications for Access to Healthcare**

To be excluded from a community of beings in which one lives due to the lack of certain features or qualities surely has dire consequences for those excluded, affecting all spheres of their lived experiences including access to healthcare, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. African communitarian philosophy of personhood shows that the community of (human) persons or selves is closely knit, with members having shared values, dispositions, and obligations to sustain community and ensure togetherness and communal wellbeing. The social and ethical obligation and responsibility to care for others within this closely knit community of selves are, however, not extended to people excluded from, or seen as not fitting into, the compact community of beings. As I have indicated, disabled people are perceived to be outside the sphere of this community of beings. Not even the social and ethical obligation and responsibility to care for COVID-positive people is extended to disabled people. Since, in Africa, community members provide indigenous and orthodox healthcare services in both small non-urban communities and large urban communities, the perception of, and the obligation and responsibility to care for, the health and wellbeing of people who are excluded in this way are negatively impacted.

In short, people who are excluded from African societies do not enjoy fair and equal treatment and opportunities with regards to healthcare. They are treated differently than nondisabled people and are not regarded as entitled to the same access to healthcare and opportunities for justice more generally. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, disabled people are unlikely to be hospitalized and even less likely to be put on ventilators if necessary. This unequal treatment is worsened by the perception of disability as expression of the wrath, anger, and error of supernatural beings, entailing that there is often no deliberate effort made to provide state-of-the-art or even adequate healthcare services to disabled people. For example, persons with autism or persons with epilepsy are often considered to be possessed by evil forces and thus are subjected to inhumane and degrading rituals and rites rather than provided with access to the healthcare that they require. Community members, including health workers, seem to be comfortable withholding care from excluded

people since they are, by virtue of the deeply rooted communitarian philosophy, not obligated to do so (see Imafidon, 2017).

I have argued that there is a systemic imbalance or asymmetry of value and power in African communities. While, within these communities, some people enjoy certain privileges, power, and access to resources by virtue of specific personal features and characteristics that they are perceived to possess, as well as their adherence to a prescribed lifestyle, other people are denied these same privileges and resources because they are perceived to lack such qualities or to deviate from this lifestyle. Important benefits that derive from possession of the esteemed ontic and normative elements of the African conception of personhood include these: social assimilation, acceptance, assimilation, and incorporation. Through social assimilation, an African person enjoys intrinsic worth, value, and power, as well as gains access to other benefits such as adequate healthcare. Personhood, in African culture and community, provides the basis on which one can enjoy rights to life, security, inheritance, property, benefit from religious rituals, proper burial when physically dead, initiation into community institutions, and so on (Imafidon, 2020). Within African communities, that is, if one is judged to lack some of the ontic or normative qualities of personhood that African communitarian philosophy outlines, social exclusion results and one will not enjoy the benefits that people deemed to possess these qualities enjoy. Disabled people – who are, by definition, deemed lacking on these terms – must therefore engage in a constant and continuous struggle to make sense of how their being and disability have been interpreted by society and to overcome this socially disadvantaged position in which they find themselves.

## **From a Narrow to a Broad Sense of Community**

I want to consider two ways in which to interrogate and challenge the exclusivist theoretical assumptions and claims about disabled people embedded into the overarching theory of personhood in African communitarian philosophy. One way involves questioning and challenging the deeply entrenched and ubiquitous paranormal theories of disability that continue to thrive in African communities with scientific theories of disability. For example, one could challenge the paranormal theories of albinism in that circulate in African cultures, including the ghost theory (albinotic persons are ghosts that simply vanish and do not die, a claim commonly heard in East Africa) and the curse theory (albinotic persons are results of ancestral curses, a claim commonly heard in West Africa) with the biological and scientific theory of albinism as the lack of melanin in the skin, hair, or eye pigments. Such questioning and challenging, an option that I have extensively explored elsewhere, calls for revolutionizing knowledge through enlightenment programs and reconstructive and awareness education (Imafidon, 2019, 2020, 2021). To end this article, I will focus on highlighting the essentials of the second approach to undermining this exclusionary conception of personhood in African communitarian philosophy, an approach that examines and deconstructs the concept of community or communal living which is central to African communitarian philosophy in general and the African concept of personhood in particular.

The sense of community that is important in African communitarian philosophy emphasizes as an ontological fact of human existence that we are all in one way or the other part of a community of beings – a being-with-others in the ontologico-existential sense – that is, we

all need a sense of belonging to a group and need others for survival, resilience, hope, and wellbeing. The community provides a space in which to find meaning, to create possibilities, to express oneself, to interact, and to foster togetherness. But the notion of community that is central to African thought is narrow. By a narrow notion of community, I mean that African community is understood in a compact, restricted, sense, as primarily consisting of beings that are intrinsically connected, bonded together by shared, values, culture, religion, beliefs, language, ancestry, ethnicity, and philosophy. This narrow sense of community portrays a community as a closed entity, one that is uneasy about difference and anything that departs from the specific forms of being that it recognizes. As I have shown, for instance, a human member of the community must take this or that form and have x and y qualities or features. Any being or thing that falls outside of the scope of these specificities becomes problematic, as we saw with the African conception of (human) personhood described above. This restrictive sort of community is structured for self-preservation and is indifferent to the concerns of people outside of its closely knit frame of existence. Such a community could, therefore, easily breed oppressive relationships with other communities based on ethnicity, ethnocentrism, tribalism, discrimination, and xenophobia. Indeed, Africa is already permeated with these sorts of lived experiences, that is, these products of a narrow sense of community: many African communities protect and sustain themselves at the cost of other communities.

A broad sense of community, on the other hand, involves a more open and receptive form of communion among people, a communion that is grounded in general, flexible, and tolerant principles of humanity and solidarity that accommodate differences rather than based on very specific and rigid forms, features, or qualities of being. In this broad sense, an African community will promote communal living, sense of belonging, solidarity, and togetherness, through the recognition of other possibilities and understandings of the world different from its own. This broad sense does not require that a community reject or completely abandon its own collective understanding and theories of being and existence. Rather, this broad sense requires recognition of the limits of one's own perspectives, the willingness to develop other perspectives, and acknowledgment of the different perspectives of other people and other communities. In this way, a community of selves becomes less hostile to, more tolerant of, and more open to, differences in general.

African philosophy, not only as an academic discipline, but also as a continuing conversation in which people have engaged for ages must prioritize the development of a broad sense of community in African places which necessitates a shift from a narrow to a broad conception of community. Furthermore, African philosophy must recognize and emphasize aspects of its own heritage that can make this shift possible – including the idea of hospitality to strangers; must develop mechanisms with which to critique aspects of African community and thought that are hostile to difference; and must map out strategies of inclusivity and openness. The primary task of contemporary African philosophy is this: to develop and sustain a more inclusive form of community in African places, thereby living true to, and substantially improving on, the African communitarian philosophical heritage. Only in this way will disabled and queer African people (among others) feel a reciprocal sense of belonging and solidarity in African communities. This reciprocity will no doubt improve access to resources such as quality healthcare during and beyond the current pandemic.

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