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Indigenous culture and the decolonisation of feminist thought in Africa

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Preamble

Feminism and women in African philosophy

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In this preamble, we highlight some of the more recent work on gender and sexuality in African philosophy. We do this as a way of introducing the special issue on "African Philosophy, Women, and Feminism". In particular, we outline and highlight the trajectory and intellectual landscape of several discussions on women and feminism in African philosophy in the issue, and in this way, build on some previous work on gender, women, sexuality and African philosophy.

Background

This special issue of the *South African Journal of Philosophy* (*SAJP*) is titled "African Philosophy, Women, and Feminism". It follows on the heels of some valuable work that has engaged with issues of gender, women and their empowerment in African philosophy in recent times. Besides this preamble, the special issue consists of seven previously unpublished articles that contribute to an emerging subfield in the discipline of African philosophy, and this is the first special issue in a journal dedicated to the topic. The editors hope the articles published here will stimulate further debate on a topic that requires urgent attention. Although common themes are highlighted below, each article carves out a niche of its own, so the editors have arranged their titles alphabetically rather than attempting the futile task of organising them in relation to an elusive thematic rationale.

Although this is the first special issue of a journal to deal with gender and sexuality from an African philosophical point of view, it is by no means the first study on the topic. Consider, for instance, Jonathan Chimakonam and Louise du Toit's edited *African Philosophy and the Epistemic Marginalization of Women* (2018). This book focuses on the epistemic marginalisation of women in African thought, broadly construed. It is commendable for the editors and contributors of this book who, in recognition of the world views and practices that privilege men over women, saw the urgency of engaging with several of these world views and practices to open up the space for women's epistemic perspectives. Their work is pioneering in many ways.

There is room, however, for questioning their worries about "entrenched traditional world views". We want a more nuanced interrogation of their view regarding these allegedly entrenched views. We need a more nuanced study of whether the "entrenched world views" are inherent to precolonial world views, or are a function of the colonial onslaught (Frantz Fanon [2004], for instance, speaks of how colonialism fosters what he terms the "petrification" of culture by the colonial onslaught). Also, as pointed out by some articles in this special issue, one must be careful not to generalise from specific cases too rapidly. Africa is a highly diverse continent after all. What at times passes as traditional African world views or cultures are often Eurocentric fabrications. This point has been recognised both by Cheikh Anta Diop (1987; 1989) and Ifi Amadiume (1987; 2005).[1]

1 For some misinterpretations of Africa and the problematic Eurocentrism of African studies in the context of the discussions of Diop and

African Philosophy and the Epistemic Marginalization of Women is not the only recent book we want to highlight. In 2022, Abosede Priscilla Ipadeola wrote the monograph *Feminist African Philosophy: Women and the Politics of Difference*. The book mainly engages with African philosophy from an African feminist viewpoint. It explores the work of women and feminist scholars such as Oyěwùmí, Nzegwu, Amadiume, Mama and Bakare-Yusuf.[2] What is striking about the book is the attempt by Ipadeola to make the case that the foundation of African philosophy should be women's perspectives and gender issues if the discipline is to be genuinely representative of the thoughts and ideas of Africans on the continent. This, no doubt, is a controversial view, and it may raise some eyebrows.

The idea of putting together a *SAJP* special issue was one that we took as part of continuing the conversations interrogating some of the most recent problems that have emerged in African philosophy and one that was ignited further by the COVID-19 crisis. Participants of the second University of the Witwatersrand and Rhodes University Winter School in African Philosophy could not meet in person as anticipated. So, we were forced to make the best of a bad situation. Fortunately, the solution ended up being better than the original plan. The Winter School series was initially conceived to foster African philosophy in the South African academy by mentoring up-and-coming and aspiring scholars interested in the field. The planned format was a face-to-face workshop, which happened in the first workshop of the Winter School series in 2018.

Given that a workshop of this nature was off the cards during the pandemic, an alternative needed to be found that would help foster the guiding aims of the Winter School series. The obvious solution would have been to have an online workshop – yet another of the innumerable ones mushrooming across the globe – but we did not think this alone would be the best way of achieving the series' aims. So, we decided to pair some of the "elders" in our community, such as Simphiwe Sesanti, Louise du Toit and Edwin Etieyibo, with promising and aspiring scholars to co-author articles on the Winter School topic for a special *SAJP* issue. Not all the articles in the collection are co-authored, but most are. Ebbah Dube and Simphiwe Sesanti's solo-authored pieces are the exceptions.

Identifying pervasive themes

A common theme running through the articles in this collection is that unhealthy gender and sex relations are a result of colonial impositions. Before the colonial storms, Africa generally had far more egalitarian and fluid gender relations than the colonisers from up north.[3] Indeed, it is arguable that gender and sexual inequality are tied to the colonial project. Despite the overwhelming force with which Africa was hit, some places have managed to safeguard their traditional gender and sex relations. This is explicitly explored in Onyinye Patricia Emua and Edwin Etieyibo's "Igbo values and women". Emua and Etieyibo argue that the colonial distortions affecting the continent did not change the Igbo people completely, at least not concerning certain aspects of the relations between men and women. On the other hand, Ebbah Dube's "The cultural distortion of the African world view and the subordination of women in 'postcolonial' African societies" focuses on how colonialism distorted feminist African ways of being across the continent.

In "Non-binary gender in African personhood?", Julia Huysamer and Louise du Toit move beyond heteronormative concerns and argue that a pervasive streak in the living philosophies in Africa south of the Sahara is that they are non-binary; that is, they argue that gender fluidity was part and parcel of African ways of being before colonial distortions.

Another theme cutting across all contributions, explicitly or implicitly, is that Western feminism should take note of its African counterpart rather than reading feminism in Africa through a Western lens. African feminism and, more broadly, understandings of gender are communitarian rather than atomistic. This is most explicitly addressed in Abiodun Paul Afolabi and Edwin Etieyibo's "Gender relations and social justice in Africa: Toward a duty-based approach to gender-based violence"

Amadiume, see Etieyibo (2021).

2 Some of these scholars, notably Oyěwùmí, Nzegwu and Amadiume form the points of reference of some of the articles in this special issue.

3 Diop (1987; 1989), Amadiume (1987; 2005), Oyěwùmí (1997; 2003; 2005), Momoh (2000) and Nzegwu (2006) have argued along related lines.

and Vitumbiko Nyirenda and Simphiwe Sesanti's "Understanding gender identity in an African communitarian perspective".

According to Afolabi and Etieyibo, the centrality of duties over rights is related to the communitarian ethos in much of the thinking south of the Sahara. African subjects, not distorted by colonialism, direct themselves towards their communities and see themselves as individuals in relation to their roles in fostering the common good. The centrality of duty over rights, they argue, will help us better deal with the issue of gender-based violence than the rights-centred approach. One of the central ways to rank individuals is through seniority rather than gender or sex. The elders deserve respect irrespective of gender or sex. This latter point regarding seniority is argued in Aderonke Ajiboro and Edwin Etieyibo's "Indigenous culture and the decolonisation of feminist thought in Africa."

Vitumbiko Nyirenda and Simphiwe Sesanti's "Understanding gender identity in an African communitarian perspective" also adds to how gender is constructed on the continent. It is not the individual that chooses, but the community. This may seem like an untoward imposition, but it is a consequence of the emphasis on duty over rights, not so much asking what the community owes the individual, but rather what the individual owes the community. Identity, including gender, is constructed in relation to individual responsibilities to the community. Another way of putting it is that gender is constructed in a collaborative space where the value of an individual, indeed how they make sense and find meaning, is inseparable from that individual's contribution to the greater good. Although this is not a point made in any of the contributions, this view seems to imply a concept of how African communities are far more active in the goings-on of political processes than their Western counterparts, where individuals tend to exercise their democratic rights at the ballot box, only to later retreat into the private sphere.

In his "bell hooks' feminist, and Ancient Egypt's philosophy of education for an enabling Afrocentric education", Sesanti argues that Eurocentric education is disabling in the sense that it is both patriarchal and racist. hooks was a feminist anti-colonial thinker who, in line with third-wave feminism, tied anti-colonial struggles with the struggle against patriarchy. Sesanti takes hooks' call for an education that is anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-patriarchal and argues that her philosophy bears significant parallels with the Egyptian *Maat* philosophy of education. He recommends a philosophy of education that aligns with hooks' and *Maat*. Sesanti proposes a philosophy grounded in Africa and the diaspora that is neither patriarchal nor racist.

Future directions

We are confident that the articles that make up this collection will stimulate further debate. One direction the debate could go in speaks to the issue of freedom. It may be true that many, if not most, African cultures privilege equality across gender lines, but it is arguable that this equality comes at the cost of freedom. We note, for instance, that the equality defended in many of the articles in this collection, if not all, implies a rigid demarcation of who can do what. This may be the price that needs to be paid for social harmony, but is the price not too high? Is something vital to the human spirit not being sacrificed by forfeiting freedom for the sake of harmony?

These concerns could follow on from a discussion of an ethics of duty.[4] An ethics of duty, it could be argued, is "organised around the requirements of duty…priority is given to the duties which individuals owe to the collectivity, and their rights, whatever these may be, are seen as secondary to the exercise of their duties" (Menkiti 1984, 180). The point then is that, unlike the ethics of rights, the ethics of duty prioritises communal flourishing over individual interests such that duties trump rights, and even though it "does not give short-shrift to rights as such; nevertheless, it does not give [an] obsessional or blinkered emphasis on rights" (Gyekye 2010). Consequently, any concerns

4 Menkiti (1984) and Gyekye (2010) have provided some of the most sustained discussions of the ethics of duty in contrast to the ethics of rights. Etieyibo (2020) has also discussed the place of an ethics of duty in the context of cultural justice and cultural injustice. Afolabi and Etieyibo's "Gender relations and social justice in Africa: Toward a duty-based approach to gender-based violence" and Nyirenda and Sesanti's "Understanding gender identity in an African communitarian world view", in this collection, also contribute to this debate.

regarding the lack of freedom in African cultures must take into account the overarching goal of the ethics of duty and the priority it gives to duties over rights.

Conclusion

It is important for African philosophy to engage more substantially than it has thus far done with issues of gender and sexuality. In addition to helping to deal with the contemporary scourge of gender based violence on the continent, African philosophy's duty-based communitarianism could add an important ingredient to the global debate on the issues dealt with in the present special issue. To this extent, we are delighted with the articles in this issue of the *SAJP*, and believe this special issue will help motivate further debate in an area that deserves far more attention than it has had. We thank the second Winter School in African Philosophy participants and those who contributed to the special issue. Finally, we thank the Mellon Foundation for providing the funding required to make this project see the light of day.

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