# Disabilities in an African Cultural Worldview[i]

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## Abstract

Disability carries different meanings and symbolisms depending on the social and cultural contexts which may cause or perpetuate pejorative and discriminatory attitudes and behavior towards people with disabilities. In this paper, I discuss a holistic (African) notion of disability in the context of the social and cultural mediation of disability and standpoint epistemology as part of my larger aim of exploring the nature of disabilities in Africa. I examine the sense in which metaphysical disability is related to physio-mental disability and gesture towards the importance of valuing difference, taking the experiences of people with disabilities seriously, and avoiding a normalizing culture.

*Keywords:* Africa, African, difference, disability, disabilities, ontological foundation, standpoint epistemology

Disability is everywhere even though people with disabilities and their needs may often be functionally invisible to many, particularly to people without disabilities. This invisibility make take the form of pejorative and discriminatory attitudes and behavior towards people with disabilities, in dynamics that may mirror in some respects other forms of discrimination, namely, racial and cultural discrimination, gender and sexual discrimination and religious discrimination. Focusing here on engagement with disabilities in Africa, I wish to discuss a holistic notion of disability, which I take to be an African cultural worldview on disability. As part of my discussion of the holistic notion of disability, I survey some beliefs about disability in Africa predicated on deficit models of disability and look at the benefits of advancing frameworks that honor difference and thus affirm the experience of disability. To do so, I examine disability meanings and symbolisms, difference and normalizing, and standpoint epistemology, gesturing towards the importance of valuing difference and taking the experiences of people with disabilities seriously.

**Disabilities Meanings and Social Contexts**

Some of the discussions that explore what disabilities stand for in different social contexts and the weight given these representations may be oblivious to aspects of cultural stereotypes of disabilities that percolate around pejorative expressions and meanings of disabilities. These harmful notions may not be helpful to the self-perception of people with disabilities or to how they may navigate the world. These symbolic meanings that disabilities have may be connected to the general attempt to construe people with disabilities as "the Other." To say that there are symbolic meanings attached to disabilities recognizes that different disabilities can have different meanings within a society. However, even at that,

Susan Wendell has reminded us that "within a society, there seem to be meanings associated with having any physical disability" and that "[t]here also seem to be some similarities in the meanings of having a physical disability across societies and over time" (1996: 63). The point is that to speak of different meanings of disability in space and time does not preclude the fact that even though there may be no broad representation types of disabilities or for disability in general, disability (as a concept), as Wendell rightly notes, in dominant discourse "tends to be associated with tragic loss, weakness, passivity, dependency, helplessness, shame, and global incompetence" (1996: 63).

This deficient model of disability may be particularly pronounced in a society in which science is lionized and which bodies are also evaluated on their perceived deviance from ideals of physical or bodily perfection. In such a model, disability may be seen as an affront to the promise of science and medicine, with "people with disabilities [as] constant reminders of the failures of that promise, and of the inability of science and medicine to protect everyone from illness, disability, and death" (1996:63).

In what would seem like a contrast to this, in such a model people with disabilities may be described as heroes, particularly when seen accomplishing tasks not considered unusual or remarkable for the nondisabled. That is, they are taken to be symbolized heroes displaying amazing heroics acts in being able to perform tasks and in exercising bodily control against all odds. In this control, they may be held as some sort of exemplars to people without disabilities who are comforted in the sense of not only reaffirming the possibility of overcoming the body but also serving as inspirations for people without disabilities. The shadow side of this apparent celebrating of people with disabilities is when their accomplishments are seen solely from the prism of providing comfort for people without disabilities or such accomplishments are used to castigate other people with disabilities who have failed or unable to perform tasks and exercise control against all odds.

Consistent with a broad social model of disability, this discussion sees disability as socially and culturally meditated. This is in obvious contrast to the so-called medical model of disability in which disability is generally understood as being limited to being a medical condition exclusively involving physical features of individuals. By contrast, the expanded perspective invited by the broad social model of disability (although not without its own theoretical and practical limitations) gives primacy and importance to certain social contexts such as politics, empowerment, citizenship and choice in the expression of disability. Disability is construed in terms of society's failure to provide adequate and appropriate services for its citizens. This is the model we see expressed by the World Health Organization (WHO), which takes disability as an 'umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions' (2011; see also WHO 2018a & 2018b). As such, this model sees disability not just as health problem, but as a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between a person's body and characteristics of the society or environment in which he or she lives. That is to say, disability does not simply refer to an individual's intrinsic features but comes about as "a result of an interaction between a person (with a health condition) and that person's contextual factors (both environmental and personal factors)" (WHO 2011) and as 'mainly as a socially created problem, and basically as a matter of the full integration of individuals into society' (WHO 2018a; Etieyibo 2020: 61).

**The Nature of Disability (Disabilities) in Africa**

Looking at some literature on perceptions of disability in Africa, Etieyibo and Omiegbe have discussed different perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of disabilities in Africa and across some societies in Africa. They note that a key idea or notion running through some of these perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of disabilities pertain to the cause(s) of disability, where disability and its cause(s) are understood in terms of "some spiritual forces."

These forces are sometimes connected to the African belief in divinities (2017:19). Regarding forces that are connected to divinities, one is urged to be in the good books of the divinities to avoid being visited with disasters and misfortunes, with many believing divinities can help solve one's problems (Etieyibo and Omiegbe). Divinities are believed to have wide influence: helping the poor, the needy and helpless; increasing the trader's sales, and generally having the ability to change one's bad destiny to a happy and good one. These divinities are also seen as posing danger, being able to inflict sickness, death or other misfortunes on the innocent. They are thus 'ambidextrous', that is, they can be both good and bad (2017:19-20).[ii]

A brief survey of some of these beliefs can provide useful insight into concepts of disability in Africa. In general, disability and disabilities are presented as implicating spiritual entities. To say this is to clearly indicate an ontological foundation of disability, one that is both spiritual and physical. Simply stated, disability involves some spirits and the spiritual world and may be related to events and practices such as reincarnation, destiny, witchcraft, etc. as outlined below.

Regarding supernatural or spiritual causes of disability Bolaji Idowu (1973) "asserts that persons, animals or birds are believed to be instruments of spiritual entities, that is possessed by spirits of all descriptions, good or bad, vengeful or helpful. It is generally believed that spirits cause insanity or other diseases, miscarriages in women or a host of disabilities in humans. The witch with perversely strong will power is seen to always operate psychologically to cause, first, psychical and then physical disasters" (Etieyibo and Omiegbe 2017: 17). Similarly, Kwabena Amponsah has discussed how in many societies in West Africa, disability is explained not in terms of Western scientific paradigms but in spiritual and non-mechanistic terms. That is, in these societies spiritual entities are postulated as causes of all sorts of calamities. This view is grounded on the belief that nothing happens without a cause;

therefore, things such as illnesses or diseases and other adversities are attributable to some spiritual or supernatural forces. The supernatural forces include witches who operate in the universe (Amponsah, 1974).

Such witches are often seen to be the one of the causes of illness and misfortunes in Africa. In focusing on the Akan society, Amponsah "notes that some misfortunes in Akan society in Ghana are attributed to dangerous and powerful witches. They are said to cause infertility, impotency as well as being capable of ruining a person financially or causing alcoholism. Additionally, these witches are said to have the powers to remove the brain of their rivals' children and add it to their own children's so that they can do well at school. According to Amponsah, the Akans believe that witches can only do harm to their close relatives. It is believed that a disease caused by witchcraft cannot be cured at the hospital but only by the medicine men and people who have 'second sight'" (Etieyibo and Omiegbe, 2017: 18).

Similarly, in the Ndembu (in Zambia) cosmology, sickness and misfortune are also said to be caused by sorcerers, witches, or ancestor spirits. Sometimes a diviner would be seen as necessary to help ascertain the source of concerns. In this society, according to Carl Elliot, sickness was seen as retribution by a spirit who had 'caught' an individual in some misdemeanor. Different ancestor-spirits would be seen as powerful forces able to cause different outcomes whether, Hansen's Disease, menstrual problems, or twin births. Consequently, the way to deal with sickness or to obtain desired states was to perform what Turner called a 'ritual of affliction' (2004: 218). Similarly, in Lele society in Zaire, malevolent persons are said to be able to impact fortune and cause disability (Meir, 1979). As in other regions, malevolent people with occult powers as seen to be at work in the events in people's lives through magic, poisoning and charming. Some of these people with occult powers are seen as needing victims to sustain their powers or seeking vengeance or to punish

others, sometimes with disability (Etieyibo and Omiegbe, 2017: 21).

A link may also be seen between this belief in the cause of disability by spiritual forces and the African belief in reincarnation. The idea of reincarnation presented in some African societies is one way of affirming the time transcending continuity in human existence (Booth, 1977). And Amponsah (1974) has noted how "the Akans in Ghana like other West African ethnic groups believe in reincarnation of ancestors." "[A]ny ancestor who does not complete his work in this world is likely to come back to complete it." Such a child is given the name "Ababio" and seen as continuously reincarnated to haunt parents after a mother's loss of several babies. The corpse of such a child is maltreated with marks to stop it from being able to continue to reincarnate. Names such as Mossi, Bola, Donko, etc. are given to children born to women who have lost several babies continuously. Marks made to the children's cheeks or around their hips indicate "the enslavement of such children who would not be born again" (Etieyibo and Omiegbe, 2017:19).

Similarly, what Amponsah notes about the Akans can also be said about the Yorubas and Igbos in Nigeria and reflected in many names given to individuals. Among the Yorubas, this includes female names like Yetunde (which can take forms like Yejide, Yewande, Yetide, Yetunji, Yeside, Yebode or even Iyabo or Iyabode) which means mother has returned or has been reincarnated. It is also reflected in male names like Babatunde, which can take the forms Babatunji, Bababode, Babs, Babaside, Babajide, Babawande, or Babatide and means mother has returned or has been reincarnated. Among the Igbos, the word Ogbanje is generally used to refer to children who are often reincarnated or 'who come and go.'

Further connection between the belief in reincarnation and disability can be seen in skepticism about the practice of alms-giving. As Aimienmwona and Etieyibo and Omiegbe separately note, giving alms to beggars is viewed with suspicion because it is believed that the reincarnation of sinful human beings is atonement for their sins, and begging for alms is a

means of paying for previous bad deeds. The traditional doctor Okhue Iboi states, 'Some of these beggars have lived and died in the previous world. Some of them were cruel to their fellow human beings so much that they were cursed.' As such, providing alms is seen as participating in the beggar's curse (Etieyibo and Omiegbe, 2017:19; Aimienmwona, 2000).

**The Ontological Foundation of Disability in Africa**

This brief survey of beliefs tells us something important about the nature of disability in Africa. In general, again disability and disabilities are presented as implicating spiritual entities. To say this is to indicate clearly an ontological foundation of disability, one that is both spiritual and physical, with disability seen as involving spirits and the spiritual world and possibly related to events and practices such as reincarnation, destiny, witchcraft, etc. The claim that disability involves the spirit world or spiritual entities is not a claim that discounts the material component of disability. Elsewhere, I have discussed the relationship between the spiritual and material component of disability in disability discourse in Africa (Etieyibo, 2022).

In previous discussions, I have taken the material component of disability to be "physio-mental" disability which accommodates both for physical disability like blindness or hearing impairment and mental disability like mental illness), and as what "we see or what manifest to us when we see someone that has a disability or when someone with some form of disability bumps against the environment or physical space" (Etieyibo, 2022). On the spiritual component of disability, which I called metaphysical disability, I had in mind "disability implicating the supernatural entities (Etieyibo, 2022). I will call both the physio-mental" disability and "metaphysical" disability as "the holistic notion of disability." To understand the holistic notion of disability let us take a look at the work of the Belgian Theologian, Placide Tempels and Godwin Sogolo. Tempels' work emerges in and from the

context of Bantu philosophy and the work of Sogolo is one that takes place in his discussion of causality in African thought. Let me start with Tempels.

In his presentation of Bantu philosophy in his book, *Bantu Philosophy* Tempels takes forces as primordial in the sense that force is integrated in being and being in force. This view of force and being has come to be known as the *force thesis* (Tempels, 1959). In Tempels' *force thesis*, being is said to be force, force is said to be being, and one's status is determined by the amount of force one has. Simply stated, the amount of force coming together determines the nature of a particular being. Léo Apostel, a Belgian philosopher and logician has discussed the philosophical import of Bantu philosophy by presenting what he takes to be its seven (ontological) principles:

- A1: The existence of anything is its being a force, and the essence of anything is its being a force.

- A2: Every force is specific.

- A3: Different types of beings are characterized by different intensities and types of force.

- A4: Each force can be strengthened or weakened.

- A5: Forces can influence each other and act upon each other in virtue of their internal natures. All forces are radically interdependent internally.

- A6: The universe is a hierarchical order of forces according to their strengths.

- A7: Beings occupying a higher rank in the hierarchy can influence all beings of lower rank, at any distance; beings of higher rank can influence beings of lower rank or equal rank, indirectly by using beings of lower rank; beings of equal rank can weaken or strengthen directly and internally the force of another being of equal rank (Apostel 1981, 26-29).[iii]

As for Sogolo, his article, "The Concept of Cause in African Thought" provides an interesting way of thinking about causality, which helps us to link Tempels' *force thesis* with disabilities in an African cultural worldview. In discussing illness or disease and how it is understood in an African cultural and social milieu, Sogolo speaks of primary and secondary causes (Sogolo, 2003: 228-237). Sogolo addresses how paying attention to the distinction between *primary* and *secondary causes* enhances our understanding of the phenomenon of witchcraft:

> Basically, the causes of illness in traditional African thought fall into two major categories, the primary and the secondary […] Primary causes of illness are those predisposing factors not directly explicable in physical terms. Some of these take the form of supernatural entities such as deities, spirits, and witches; others are stress-induced either as a result of the victim's contravention of communal morality or his/her strained relationships with other persons within the community. Secondary causes, on the other hand, involve direct causal connections similar to the cause-effect relations of the germ theory in orthodox modern medicine. (Sogolo, 2003: 234)

On this view of cause or causality, causes could be understood strictly in mechanistic (scientific/natural) terms or non-mechanistic (spiritual/religious) terms. Mechanistic (scientific/natural) explanation focuses on *secondary causes* and non-mechanistic (spiritual/religious) focuses on *primary causes* (even though *secondary causes* are not necessarily discounted). This idea of non-mechanistic or supernatural causes is one that we saw with Amponsah (1974) above regarding misfortunes in many societies in West Africa and the belief that nothing happens without a cause.

One takeaway then from Sogolo's presentation is that illness or disease in the context of *primary cause* is understood in terms of the individual's relationship with the spirit world

and treatment or cure results from addressing both *primary* and *secondary* causes. Thus, if we think of this view of causality in relation to illness or disease as grounded on the same ontology or metaphysics as the view of disability not just in terms of *primary* and s*econdary causes* but also in terms of treatment or cure for the illness or diseases or disabilities, then the plausibility of the primary and secondary causation view (or causality view) is one that may suggest a holistic notion of disability. Having looked at Temple's *force thesis* and Sogolo's causality view, let us now link them together in making sense of my discussion of the holistic notion of disability in Africa.

If one focuses closely on the notion of force, one could simply think of forces either as some kind of energy or more broadly like how in the physical sciences some entities are understood, namely, analogous to the interaction of atoms, particles, molecules and matter. First, we take a being and force or forces as any entity, which is either material or immaterial. Secondly, as atoms, particles, molecules and matter forces are the basic building blocks of all existence, in the *force thesis* "force is being and being is force." Third, what makes one form of being different from another form of being is their forces (their number of quantities and how they are packed together).

This way of thinking of forces and being then makes one able to say that disability (in an African worldview) as presented may be seen as an umbrella term that describes how an entity or being influences another entity or being in the spiritual sphere leading to a visible manifestation of such disability or its expression in the physical sphere. In a way then one might say that what is seen to occur when "the influence" takes place in the spiritual realm or world gives way to or produces metaphysical disability, and the manifestation or expression of metaphysical disability in the physical realm or world refers to physio-mental disability. Accordingly, it could be said that a being without disability and one with disability are simply entities or beings who are in possession of different degree of forces or vitality (that are

packed into different forms), just as a being in the spiritual sphere and one in the material sphere are beings with different degrees of forces or vitality (packed into different forms).

More broadly, this holistic view of disability suggests an African cultural worldview on disability emphasizing differences. That is, beings or entities are different in degrees and not in kinds since they are but beings of the same nature or kind. This is so given that beings are in possession of different degrees or amount of forces and that it is this that demarcates or marks difference or differences.

**Ethical Underpinnings, Value and Persons with Disabilities**

The African understanding and representations of disability that I have discussed in the last two sections show certain ontological and epistemological underpinnings. As I have gestured to and briefly summarized in the section on the ontological foundation of disability on the continent, disability in Africa has both a spiritual and physical component. Although I have not discussed this, it is important to note that there are ethical dimensions and underpinnings to this discussion, both in terms of how disability understandings determine value of, and justify action towards, persons with disabilities. It is not unexpected, as I have discussed elsewhere, that various understandings and beliefs inform attitudes towards persons with disabilities and that these find expressions in actions directed towards persons with disabilities. Etieyibo and Omiegbe (2016) have discussed how discriminatory practices or behavior against persons with disabilities flow from various beliefs that people hold about disability:

> Our discussion has highlighted that religion and culture promote certain beliefs and attitudes about disability and people with disabilities that lead to discriminatory practices. That is, they are sustaining factors in discrimination against people with disabilities. (2016: 5)

What Etieyibo and Omiegbe have noted has been echoed by other scholars. The point brought out by these scholars is a simple one but worth stating: beliefs one holds about disability constitute foundation blocks and essential elements upon which one's attitude and behavior towards persons with disabilities may be grounded (See Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice, 2007; Fishbien and Azen, 1975; Ozoji, 1991). This underscores the dangers associated with deficit models of disability and the overall importance of employing models that may allow us to affirm and value difference.

**Valuing Differences**

Goffman (1963) et al. remind us of the importance of valuing and honoring difference. There are obvious practical implications of valuing disability or disabilities as difference(s), for instance, in relation to efforts to develop technologies to prevent people with disabilities from being born and initiatives to find "cures" for disabilities, which ultimately may be less concerned with alleviating suffering, than with minimizing deviations from what is taken to be "normal." This honoring of differences may also allow us to better appreciate the role disabilities may play in individual's identification (Wendell, 1996: 83).

**Disability and Standpoint Epistemology**

What I have said about disability in an African cultural worldview may invariably lend credence to standpoint epistemology both in terms of cultural experiences of difference in the context of disability and difference in experiences regarding people with disabilities and people without disabilities. That is first, an African worldview on disability may seem to provide one cultural difference in experience regarding disability compared to other cultural views; secondly, even within a particular cultural worldview there may be multiple

experiences of disability; and thirdly, obviously there may be differences in experiences between people with disabilities and people without disabilities.

Here we understand standpoint epistemology as suggesting that there are certain epistemic experiences of some people (oppressed groups, etc. and in this case people with disabilities) that give them certain standpoint or advantages over others, namely, non-oppressed or dominant groups. Feminists have been in the forefront for the advocation and advancement of standpoint epistemology, which in feminist space refers to feminist standpoint epistemologies, namely, feminist descriptions of the nature and substance of knowledge and the processes of creating knowledge.[iv] In a nutshell, standpoint epistemology holds that "some groups of people have access to experiences that are not directly available to others, and that those experiences could give them, not only a different, but a truer and more complete perspective on some aspects of the world" (Wendell, 1996:72).  Such an epistemology can help us better understand and communicate the contribution the experience of disability makes to communities. To this point, Wendell states:

> I want to say that having a disability usually gives a person experiences of a world different from that of people without disabilities, and that being a woman with a disability usually gives a person different experiences from those of people who are not female and disabled, and that these different experiences create the possibility of different perspectives which have epistemic advantages with respect to certain issues. (1996: 73)

In saying that having a disability usually gives a person experiences different from that of people without disabilities, one should be careful not to trade in the currency of homogenizing the experiences of people with disabilities. Such disability homogenization is similar to attempts that homogenize women or the experiences of female subjects, which feminists have warned us to be wary of and which has led to people like Patricia Hill Collins

to defend a standpoint epistemology of Black feminist thought (Collins 1989, 1990 & 2004).

If we take seriously the ideas of standpoint epistemology and how disability relates to it in terms of different or privileged epistemic experiences of people with disabilities compared to the experiences of those without disabilities, then what I have presented as a holistic notion of disability should give us insight into the value of linking standpoint epistemology with disability. The holistic notion of disability, as I have said, can be taken to be an African cultural worldview on disability and I think that this notion of disability may help us explain the experiences of people with disabilities in Africa more generally. Conceptually, we take disability as a fusion of metaphysical disability and physio-mental disability. However, because we understand the spiritual as important and prominent for an understanding of disability in an African worldview, we expect the experiences of people with disabilities in an Africa space to be influenced by this understanding. This understanding and experiences will invariably be different from the experiences of people with disabilities from a different cultural and social milieu.

## Conclusion

In this paper, as part of my overarching aim of making sense of and presenting a case for a holistic (African) notion of disability, our exploration of disability meanings and symbolisms ultimately makes a case for the role standpoint epistemology may play in a more holistic appreciation of the role of disability in culture. Taking metaphysical disability as spiritual disability and physio-mental disability as material disability, the holistic notion of disability *qua* the African cultural worldview on disability provides another reason or argument for taking seriously standpoint epistemology, in general, and the experiences of people with disabilities, in particular. My discussion of standpoint epistemology and its connection to disability helps us appreciate not just the importance of standpoint

epistemology but also the significance of allowing epistemic flourishing. Such flourishing can mitigate the risk of losing out on the knowledge that comes from the context- and regional-specific experiences of people with disabilities.

## End notes

[i] A version of this paper was first presented at the *Disability and African Indigenous Thought Workshop.* A workshop organized by the Disability and Inclusion Africa Network [Thursday February 25, 2021. Other iterations of the paper have been presented in different academic fora since then and parts of that presentation has been published in Etieyibo (2022).

[ii] See also Awolalu and Dapamu (1979).

[iii] See also Diagne (2016: 19-20).

[iv] For some discussions of feminist standpoint epistemologies see Harding (1993 & 2004); Hartsock (2004); Longino (1993); Narayan (2004); Rolin (2006).

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