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African Philosophy of Difference and Disability

Summary

Disability is an excellent example of the normativity and politics of difference, where difference becomes a social construct rather than an ontic reality, that could negatively impact persons with disability. All human traditions philosophise, reflect and construct theories about disability. African philosophy of disability consists of attempts to explore and critically examine ontological, epistemological and moral/axiological theories of disability embedded in African cultures. In this lecture, I aim to explore aspects of African philosophy of difference and disability in relation to the Life Course Theory (LCT), considering that the interdisciplinarity of the LCT is often not extended to Philosophy. I show that the LCT as a hermeneutics of disability in sub-Saharan Africa benefits greatly from, and is enriched by, the rich theoretical perspectives in African philosophy of disability and difference such as the ontological and axiological perspectives. I instantiate this by focussing on taken-for-granted assumptions in the LCT about the normativity of the life course, the human, difference and agency that are closely examined in the philosophical perspective. The analysis would show the flexibility and fluidity of the LCT and its ability to grow through more interdisciplinarity.

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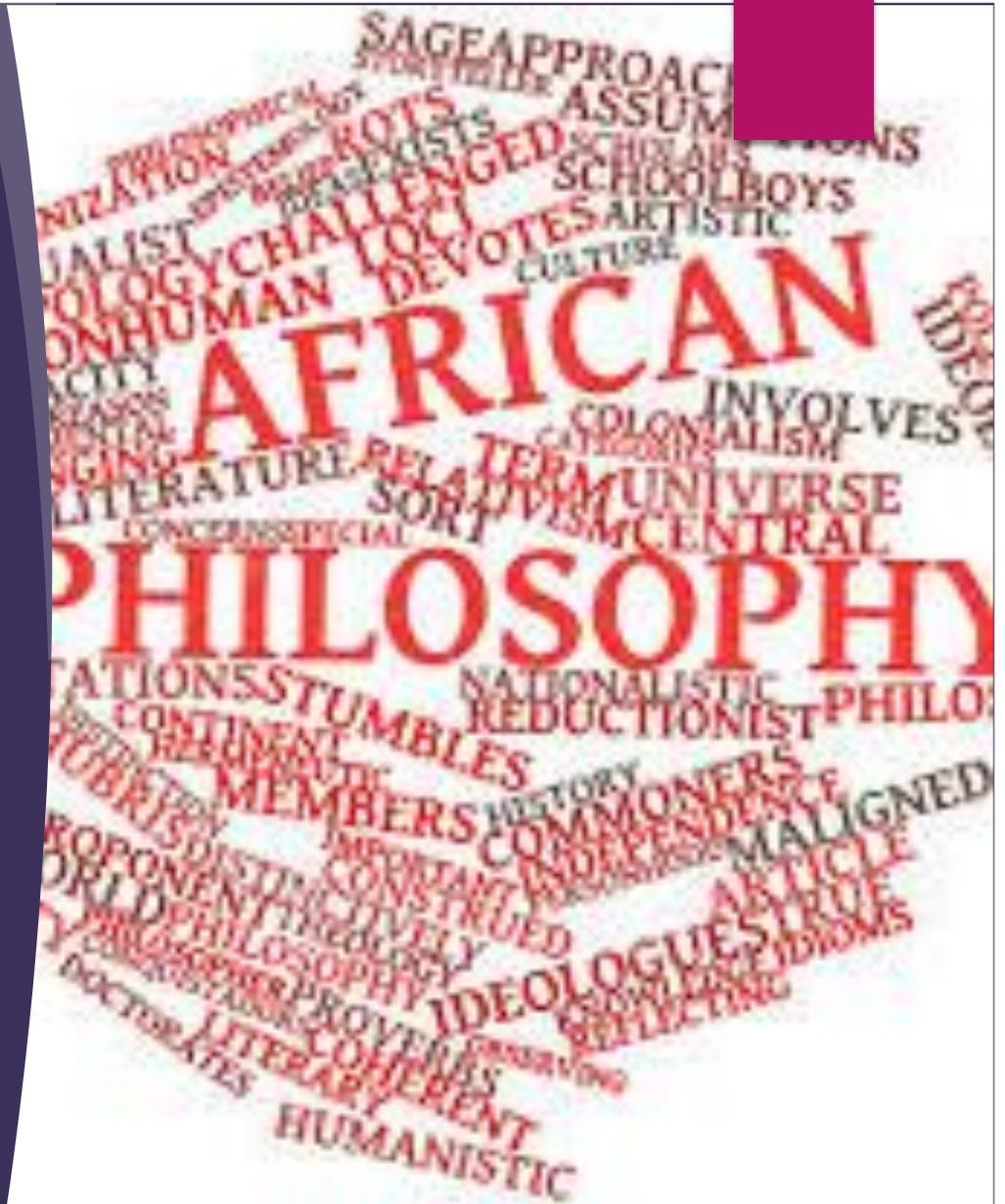
Disability and the politics of difference

- ▶ Difference as ontic reality. To be is to be different and bodies and minds are manifestations of difference.
- ▶ Disability as largely emerging from the normativity of bodies/minds, the norm of the state one ought to be in, lack of which results in disability.
- ▶ The medico-scientific understanding of disability as impairment, existential participatory restrictions thrives side-by-side social constructs/norms of bodies, functions and existence.
- ▶ A more holistic conception of disability as lack of self-sufficiency qualifies all as having one form of disability or the other.



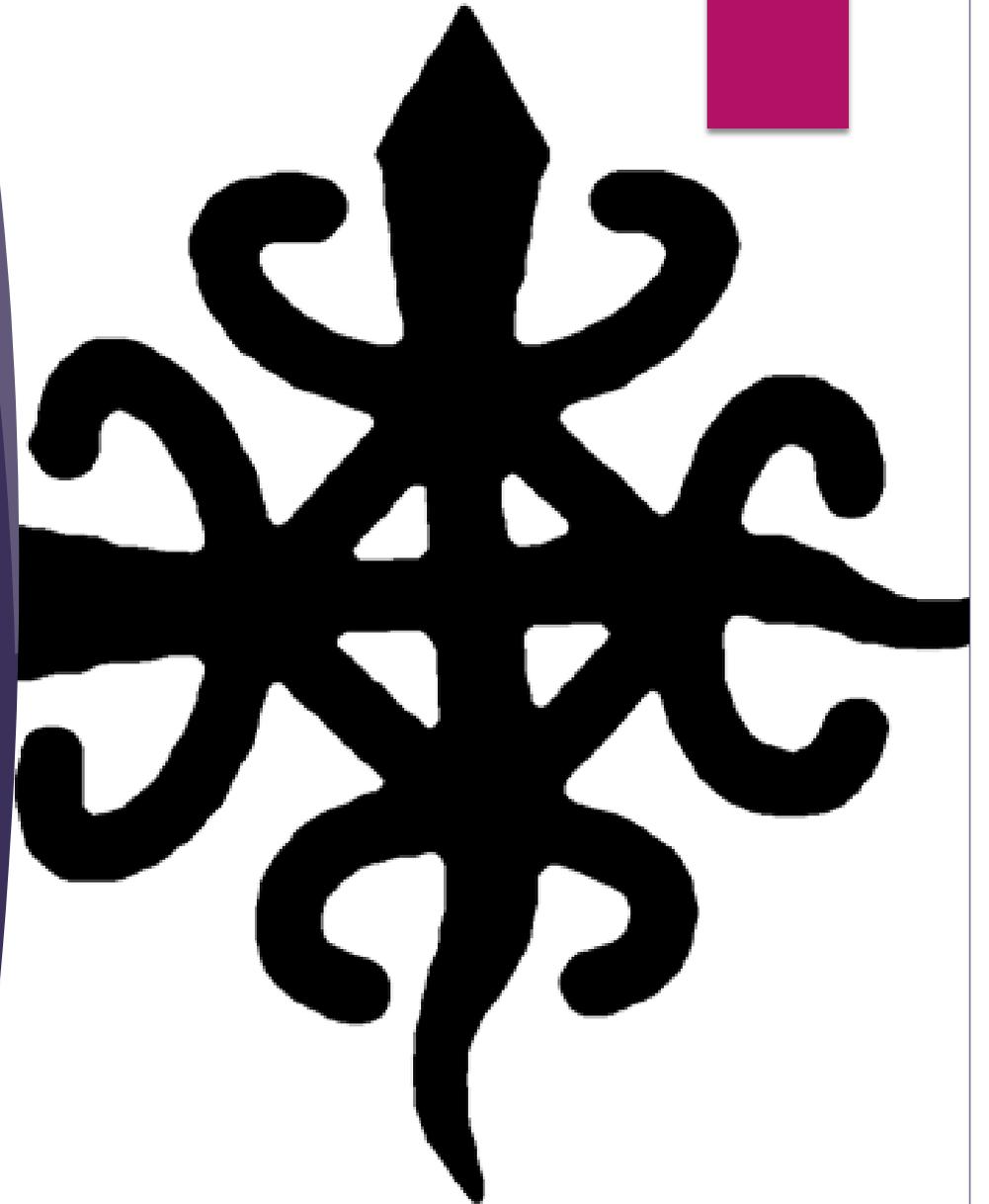
What is African Philosophy?

- ▶ Philosophy as the search for, and formulation of general principles, such as those of reality, knowledge, ethics, aesthetics, etc.
- ▶ Philosophising happens, and philosophical interests and theories are found, in all human societies and this was acknowledged until the Enlightenment when Philosophy became streamlined to a purely Western mode of inquiry with a Greek origin
- ▶ African philosophy contributes to the disrupting and decolonisation of the understanding of philosophy as a purely Western enterprise.
- ▶ African philosophy explores and critiques theories or general principles of being, knowing and acting that emerge from the African place



Afro-communitarianism and Difference

- ▶ A fundamental philosophical theory that emerges from sub-Saharan Africa is the communitarian philosophy, often expressed using the Zulu word Ubuntu: '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,' which means 'a person is a person through other persons.'
- ▶ Afro-communitarianism is an ontological, epistemological, ethical, social and political philosophy that emphasizes co-dependency, relationality, other-regarding duties, solidarity, communal harmony in the building of an interwoven and interconnected community of beings.
- ▶ At the ontological level, it is a theory of the interconnectedness of all being



Afro-communitarianism and Difference

- ▶ At the ethical level, it is the need to dutifully sustain such interconnectedness
- ▶ How is difference as an ontic quality represented in Ubuntu philosophy?
- ▶ Theoretical level: Ubuntu as the recognition of difference and the need to bring together these manifold of differences to enrich humanity (the inclusion of difference principle).
- ▶ Concrete level: Due to a narrow conception of community and the theorization of the nature of being human, the lived experiences in African places show the exclusion and marginalization of difference.
- ▶ Contemporary African philosophical discourses as consisting of attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice.



African philosophy of disability



- African philosophy of disability is the critical examination of the African perspectives on philosophical questions about disability:
- How does disability come into being? (ontological questions)
- How are knowledge claims about disability produced? What sort of knowledge claims about disability are true and justified? (epistemological questions)
- What are the ethical implications of our understanding of disability? What are our moral obligations to the disabled (ethical questions)
- African approaches to, or answers to, such philosophical questions are embedded in her ontological, epistemological and ethical theories

African philosophy of personhood and disability

Key questions: Who is a person? What qualities must a human being possess or display to qualify as a person?

The African perspective: two interwoven dimensions to personhood – the ontological/descriptive and the social/normative.

The ontological consists of physiological, biological and metaphysical features that showcases ones connection with other beings in the community (e.g., with ancestors, divinities and the supreme being).

The normative consists of individual agency, showing sustained efforts to act in community-accepted ways that builds relationships and sustains the community of beings.



African philosophy of personhood and disability

A life-course perspective is thus embedded within the African theory of personhood. While the ontological dimension lays the foundation for a life course to emerge by providing the needed tools for pursuing an appropriate life course, the normative dimension prescribes what the life course should be, including how temporality and finitude are shaped, a bibliography template, what constitutes success, what sort of life is worth living, etc.

In West African cultures, persons with disabilities (PWDs) do not fit well into the ontological dimension of personhood due to lack of certain biological and metaphysical features. This is why they are excluded and marginalised from the ontological structure as sub-human. This is often clearly seen in language.



African philosophy of personhood and disability

Since the normative dimension is intrinsically interwoven with the ontological dimension, and since persons with disabilities are theorised as sub-humans due to lack of some ontological features, the normative dimension with the embedded life-course is thus disrupted. I.e., Frictions in ontology, results in social exclusion and disruption of life course.

E.g., a person with albinism in Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Malawi, South Africa, etc., whose ontology are captured with such words as zero (ghosts), isishawa (the cursed), afin (horrible), obroni (foreigner) institutes exclusion from social life, and disrupts all aspects of the normatively prescribed life course.



LCT, Disability in Africa and taken-for-granted assumptions

- ▶ The beauty of the LCT is in its interdisciplinarity / transdisciplinarity, bringing on board important perspectives from sociology, history, economics, biology and developmental psychology, leading to a rich and robust contextuality of individual development.
- ▶ But a salient but taken-for-granted assumption in the LCT is about the 'human' in the life course, the 'life' undergoing a course, as if the idea of the human and life is same everywhere. This might blind us to very important ways of thinking about the life course.
- ▶ As we see with disability in Africa, more primordial questions to ask would include questions about who are human enough to be in the life course in the first place.



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African philosophy and LCT

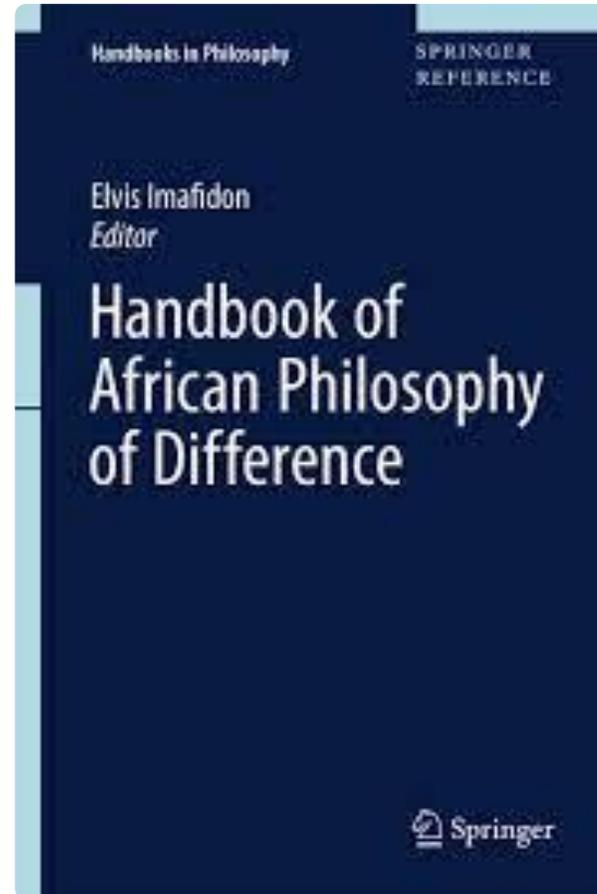
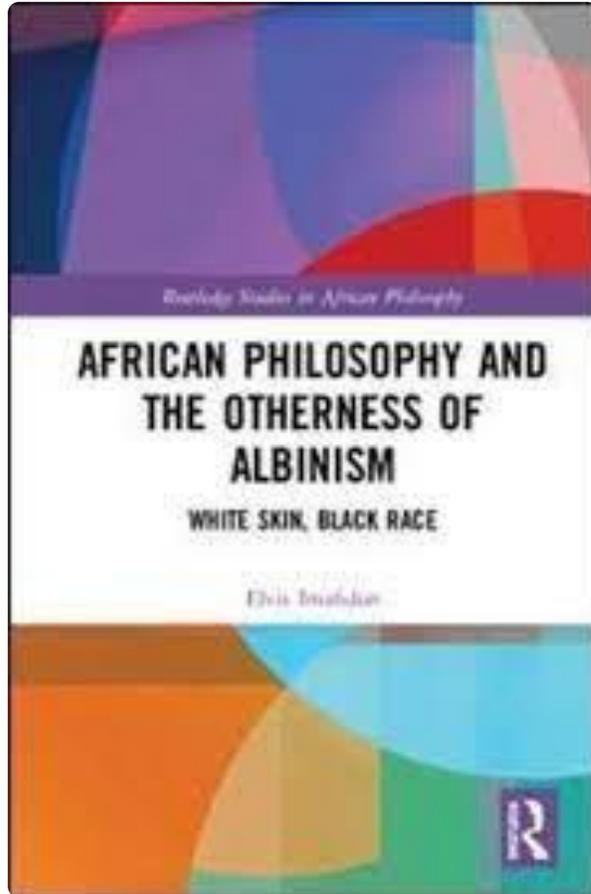


Interrogating the concepts of life, human, and life course in specific contexts and how they impact the life course perspective (similar to the philosophy of human rights, philosophy of healthcare, etc.).

Understanding how an allegedly sub-humans/non-humans disrupts, transcends, creates a life course beyond the norm and the prospects and challenges that are infused into that process.

Exploring the theoretical wellspring of normative theories of difference, disability, humanness, etc and how they enrich the conventional perspectives.

Disrupting the Life course: My research on disability on sub-Saharan Africa



As a researcher whose concrete experiences, situatedness and biases fuelled my research, leading to a disruption of the life course.

African ontology as essential in understanding concrete realities of disability in African societies.

Transcending intrinsic values to earned values, allowing for agency in the creation of one's life course

Conclusion

LCT has much to benefit from paying attention to indigenous philosophies about personhood, the self and the human in different contexts and traditions. The focus on historical, economical, sociological, geographical, biological, physiological and psychological factors in life course does not only need to be done in ways that are decolonised, but is not enough without equal focus on the ontological, epistemological and ethical. Such broadening of the focus of LCT is hermeneutically fruitful in understanding lived experiences and life course perspectives in specific places and horizons. Life course theorists need to always ask: what are the philosophical underpinnings of the life course in specific contexts? This enriches their research.



Thank you

DISCUSSION/QUESTIONS