

## Editorial

# Theorising African Feminist Ethics

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### Introduction – Why Theorisation Matters

Theorising aids intellection and affordances to connect varying components of thoughts, concepts, contexts and experiences. Drawn from the synthesis of wide-ranging ideologies into reasoned systems that help to capture, break down and explain intricate, hidden or unknown trends, theorising is a complex and multi-dimensional process. However, theories (which are outputs of theorising) may describe and/or prescribe the depth to which phenomena may be understood and the direction of a study. This confirms Hammond's (2018, 2) finding that "theorising involve[s] finding a perspective or 'lens' through which a problem should be viewed and an invitation to see the problem in a new or revised way." Theorisation is important for problem identification, recognition of patterns and typologies, naming as well as for its impact on praxis such as social policy and action-research. These may take routes of induction, deduction and/or abstraction – as will be discussed later. It is in recognition of this that significant issues of *Feminist Africa* have engaged in revisiting, theorising and rethinking concepts, systems and structures that normalise all forms of oppression.

This issue of *Feminist Africa* unpacks the theorising of feminist ethics from an African diverse, yet purposeful, lens. Despite being downplayed in global philosophy, feminist ethics in African contexts have long been conceptualised, problematised and theorised within and across different academic fields such as philosophy, gender/women's studies, cultural studies, religious studies and sociology. In the process of addressing ethical questions in relation to women, we identify three major approaches to feminist ethics. The

first is a theorisation of ethics within philosophical contexts covering the moral evaluation of actions, that is, moral issues pertaining to women and girls and the justification and judgment of actions as right or wrong within women's lived experiences. Second is the context of research within which issues of methodology in feminist and gender research are appraised, especially considering the safety of study participants in ethnographic studies. Third is a contextualisation of ethics and ethical practice in terms of power relations, agency and responsibility, rather than understanding ethics merely as a moral evaluation.

In the first sense, researchers are themselves seeking appropriate moral principles, formulating conceptual frameworks and introducing theories to validate lived experiences and justify their plausibility. In the second sense, "feminist ethic means that we want our means (research methods and practices) to be compatible with the ends (liberatory and transformative)" (Mama 2011, 13). In doing ethics, Mama shows that "feminist researchers often face the dilemma of deciding when to allow research to be instrumentalised by the narrow needs of policy makers, and when and how to pursue more qualitative, possibly transformative, research methodologies" (2011, 13). In a 2009 volume edited by Adomako Ampofo and Arnfred titled *African Feminist Research and Activism – Tensions, Challenges and Possibilities*, all the authors grapple with this dilemma to varying degrees. The third sense connects power with responsibilities. Pereira (2004, 5) describes it as "the un/ethical character of practice ... critically shaped by the exercise of agency..." while operating within multiple zones of influence – individual, institutional and cultural (Pereira 2022, 91). We see this clearly expressed in the sharing of the knowledge space with younger feminists, for example, through joint publications or meetings free of hierarchies that silence or unnecessarily label. On the flip side, we sometimes find the appropriation of junior scholars' works, without acknowledgment or permission, with assumptions that they will feel privileged to be "included" in this way. We recognise these senses of feminist ethics as complementary in the achievement of pre-defined research objectives, deepening the understanding of issues or studies to which they are applied. Although the first sense of feminist ethics described above is the focus of the current issue, the writings in this issue encompass (in part) the three senses. We

have not only offered conceptual and theoretical frameworks but also presented phenomenological and moral reasonings around power relations.

## **The Challenge of a Prevalent Western-Centric Theorising of Feminist Ethics**

Theorisation of ethics has drawn largely from studies from the so-called global north, and, consequently, feminist ethics has also suffered from an imposition of ethical theories from and by Western-oriented feminists on experiences of global south women. This theorising often follows a deductive approach, where generalised experiences of oppression are subjected to feminist ethics of care as an unquestionable elixir – a faulty logic that care is always an ideal and must always come to the rescue of oppression. Moreover, even in understanding specific experiences of Africa, an inductive process of theorising also risks reverting to “foreign” popularised feminist ethical thinking, which only offers a likely, but not guaranteed, result rather than pragmatic ones. In the context of the recent resurgence<sup>1</sup> of discourses of decoloniality, African feminist philosophers have been outspoken in their questioning of the origin, nature and relevance to African contexts of ethical theories drawn from Western-oriented feminists. A case in point is the notion of a feminist ethics of care, which informs Imafidon’s (2018, 170) position that “when a Western feminist examines African women’s understanding of care from her epistemic lenses, she is bound to experience difficulties and misjudge matters.” Supporting this, Omotoso (2018) observes that scholars of African studies have only partially succeeded in debunking popularised ethical theories from the global north but have been reticent in naming and claiming emerging theories found more relevant to Africa.

Consequently, Ope Akoleowo’s article titled “Of Place and Space: Towards a Phenomenological Foundation for African Feminist Ethics” offers a philosophical grounding for theorising African ethics. Using *Ubuntu* as a case study, the article contends that both care ethics (usually pitched as feminist) and African ethics (blamed for its androcentrism) are important, but insufficient frameworks for African feminist ethics. The article prescribes that an African feminist ethics is best developed through an integration of phenomenological insights to arrive at a context-sensitive approach to

addressing the unique challenges faced by African women. This presents a dual-natured enterprise, one that is cognisant of both the universal nature of the gender category of women (spatial) and the distinct, particular nature of African women (platial). While place refers to the socio-cultural and historical context in which individuals find themselves, space represents the broader structures of power and normativity that shape gender relations. Phenomenology is not only offered as a tool for theorising African feminist ethics, but also presented as a methodological approach in deepening research in African feminist ethics. Akoleowo's spatio-platial postulation, when utilised, is hoped to produce an authentic African feminist ethics that will allow for the reclaiming of African women's moral agency.

While descriptions (found across studies spotlighting intersections of power, privilege and access) and prescriptions (which often provide African feminist alternative thoughts and actions) have been expressed and employed, not many of these have been named as African feminist ethical theory. Of course, this is not surprising given the global politics of knowledge production. However, despite the important work done by African feminists, we have ourselves not been as pervasive in appropriately naming our theoretical contributions and have often simply described the constituent elements and features of what we discuss. This trend is found in the work of Mangena (2009) who argues that the Western-centric liberating ethics of care contributes largely to repressing Zimbabwean women further in their encounters of caring for errant spouses living with HIV and AIDS. Mangena describes the implausibility of Western-centric feminist ethics of care but does not proceed to name the newly proffered African feminist ethics – a home-based care ethics built on the idea of *Hunhu* (in Shona), *Ubuntu* (in Ndebele or Nguni) and *Botho* (in Sotho) (Mkhize 2008).

To address the lacuna of mere description, Fayemi (2009, 205) prescribes an “African ethico-feminism” framework which emphasises dignity over human debasement, reason over emotions, changes over absolute traditional practices and virtues over vicious acts in masculine/feminine interrelationships. However, Fayemi's African ethico-feminism consciously keeps a gender, rather than feminist framing. This has created a more desperate search for specific African feminist ethical theories that can be interrogated, re-interrogated and applied, affirming Mama's assertion that “feminist research

in Africa, as much as anywhere else, is defined by the epistemology that frames it, the theory we develop and our commitment to a feminist field ethic, rather than the tools themselves” (2011, 14).

Responding to the ardent search for specific African feminist ethical theories, the standpoint article of this issue describes the call for the theorisation of African feminist ethics as a decolonial project. Omotoso reflects on the current constituents of African feminist ethical theories and spotlights a tired repetition and recreation of components drawn from Western feminist ethics of care, which are often imposed on cultural ideologies and experiences particular to African communities, both in our homelands and the diaspora. By unpacking identity, nomenclature and intersections as three key issues to consider in theorising African feminist ethics, the standpoint article calls attention to more scholarly explorations of emerging theories including what she describes as an “African feminist ethics of vigour” (Omotoso 2018; 2023; Omotoso and Faniyi 2024). Other theoretical approaches include ethics of liberation (Kinoti 2010), ethics of care-fulness (Dieng 2023), and Ancestralism (Ipadeola 2025). Omotoso also calls attention to the need for scholars to reengage with “classical” African (feminist) theories such as Motherism, STIWANISM, Nego-Feminism and Femocracy, to tease out ethical components and apply them in ways that may be relevant to contemporary situations.

## **Foregrounding African Feminist Ethics**

Olojede (2020, 3) reiterates the yearnings of several African feminist scholars for the “need to develop our own contextualised African feminist ethics that is grounded in endogenous African realities, experiences, and contexts.” Other scholars have also emphasised that in addition to a more relevant and authentic theorising of an African feminist ethics politically, we must also make it practically relevant for the mental and social wellbeing of African women and our communities (Mangena 2009; Fayemi 2009; Ipadeola 2017; Oyeleye 2018). This reiterates the need for “abstracting something from the data in order to explain what [i]s happening” (Hammond 2018, 4). Abstraction should discourage the imposition of theories and thoughts that do not completely fit

to what is being studied, especially in terms of location, lived experiences and the politics of knowledge production.

To this end, this issue, which consists of five features, one standpoint article, one in-conversation article and one book review, unearths past, present and emerging theories of African feminist ethics to provide a robust body of knowledge on African feminist ethical theories: what they are or have been called and the problems and questions that they seek and have sought to address.

We engaged two amazing women, both self-identified feminists, in conversation on theorising and practising African feminist ethics: the then 34-year-old Ghanaian-Burkinabé R&B and soul singer-songwriter Ria Boss and renowned feminist theologian, Professor Mercy Oduyoye, who had just marked her 91st birthday. Although they could be granddaughter and grandmother, they also share many experiences and viewpoints including expressions of agency in contexts of covert and overt subversions, and notions of solidarity and its practices. Oduyoye began the discussion on a note about the erasure of women's identities through naming. She laments how her original birth name – Ama Ewudziwa – was gradually erased by Mercy and eventually further replaced in marriage. Boss notes how discourses on feminist ethics often gravitate towards care when justice is as important. Both women trace their expressions of agency to their foremothers, grandmothers and mothers, affirming feminist ancestry – an important legacy in African communities. The conversation identifies with “African feminist ethics of agency, justice and solidarity” helping to break barriers through strategic and deliberate actions for cross-generational struggles and victories.

## **Beyond Feminist Ethics of Care**

The article by Ayodeji Soyemi and Helen Olojede focuses on grounding care ethics in African (Yoruba) values of *ìtọ́jú* (careful attention and maintenance), *ìkẹ́* (care and nurturing) and *ìgẹ̀* (pampering or indulgence). They present an “African feminist ethics of holism,” arguing that bodily care extends to care for the environment, animals, finances and activism. Soyemi and Olojede's ethics of holism resist fragmenting people from their bodies, their communities, or the earth that sustains them. Accordingly, the framework holds that caring for

another is inseparable from caring for oneself and for the broader ecological context that enables all relationships to exist.

Within the same line of holism, comes the study of caring for the dead and how women feature within the process and re-invent traditional norms, particularly in the face of a global pandemic. In the article titled “Silent Mourning: Re-Interrogating Feminist Ethics of Care and Government’s Political Communication during COVID-19 in Nigeria”, Bolaji Akanni, Rukayat Usman and Sharon Omotoso discuss intersections of feminist ethics for comprehending care and grief amid crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They explain how women silently mourned their loved ones due to conflicting government regulations across the country regarding COVID-19-related deaths and approved burial rites. While acknowledging that some aspects of burial rites may aggravate women’s care burdens, the article found a significant adoption of an “African feminist ethics of ambivalence” during the COVID-19 pandemic through which women navigated the complex pressures of tradition, state regulation and spiritual duty. This afforded the women a balance between moderation and elaborate post-death rites based on Yoruba cosmology, thus emphasising resilience amid complex situations so that care does not deepen gendered marginalisation. The authors’ African feminist ethics of ambivalence extol values of adaptability, structural responsiveness and creative engagement with cultural roots.

Since theorising African feminist ethics is an ongoing project that is shaped by activism, research and advocacy, Marie-Rose Tshite comes to her work from a research ethics angle in the article titled “African Feminist Ethics of Co-creation: Researching Women’s Peacemaking in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” Tshite argues that researchers must acknowledge and transcend the rhythmic motion like a subtle dance between retreat for reflection (the ebb) and active participation (the flow) while conducting sensitive studies such as those in gender and peacebuilding. Noting that African research ethics devoid of African feminist concerns can reproduce inequalities and silences, the article offers an “African feminist ethics of co-creation,” which echoes a decentring of the researcher as one who consciously refrains from determining which part of a story should be told and how it must be told.

In a similar vein, highlighting how tensions between external development frameworks and local resistance practices complicate grassroots-led socioeconomic transformation, Janet Husunukpe's article "Feminisms that Feed Us: African Feminist Ethics, Everyday Resistance, and the Futures of Development" argues that tensions become apparent when grassroots women sense a deliberate drowning of indigenous knowledge (on issues such as menstrual hygiene and bride wealth) by Western narratives to foster economic and epistemic dependency. By arguing that African feminist ethics are not only historically rooted but are also evolving in response to changing economic and environmental pressures, Husunukpe presents an "African feminist ethics of reciprocity," which challenges donor accountability amid the conditionalities of international funding meant to aid grassroots development. Reciprocity emerges as grassroots women enact values in their everyday lives, while activists expand them into organised movements. In return for training and empowerment programmes from NGOs, the grassroots women's work emphasises mentorship, skills-sharing and knowledge transmission, merging traditional ethics with strategies for social transformation. The article shows that African feminist ethics are not only theoretical – they are enacted, revised and negotiated in response to material conditions. It enjoins development workers to be humble enough to learn from communities, rather than enforcing narratives that constrain rather than develop.

## **Building African Feminist Ethics on Lived Experiences**

Overall, this issue of *Feminist Africa* builds on lived experiences currently addressed by existing theories of African feminist ethics, affirming that African feminist ethical theories are not fixated on the idolised past but are future-oriented. To untangle African women's contemporary ethical conundrums, the articles in this journal present emerging, homegrown ethical theories, proffering African solutions to African challenges and confirming their applicability in African contexts as well as their suitability for addressing ethical questions in other socio-political contexts.

In furthering ethics theorising in African feminist research for the future, we invite you to engage with these multiple reflections on feminist ethics in a season when young people, especially, are experiencing increasing precarity

and heightened feelings of anxiety. In the spirit of the foremothers who advocated for the silent and silenced notions of African feminist ethics, our knowledge must transcend the theoretical and expand daily ethics experiences in tangible ways. Beyond care, we must also share strategies for building holistic, reciprocal, co-creational and agentic African feminist ethics into our feminist politics so none of us feel overextended or excluded. This means having conversations, listening, sharing and developing practical tools collectively.

## Notes

1. We say “recent resurgence” because, of course, political African and Black studies have always taken a decolonial approach, even if the language has been more muted in the post-structural adjustment contexts than it was in the early 20th-century discourse. The Fallist movements helped to recentre the language of decolonisation (see Adomako Ampofo 2016). One may also argue that institutions such as CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa) and Institutes of African Studies at places such as the University of Ibadan and the University of Ghana, as well as the journal *Feminist Africa*, have always taken a decolonial approach in their teaching and research.

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