

Theorising African Feminist Ethics: What, Why and How?

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Introduction

Feminist studies have allowed for a suffixing of ethics with various terms with reference to lived experiences across spaces. Most popular among such is the feminist ethics of care drawn largely from global north experiences and often uncritically applied across cultures due to little or no attention paid to deeper contextual theorising on, from and for Africa. Why is African feminist ethics important? How should we think about feminist ethics in an African sense? What should constitute African feminist ethical theories? This piece seeks to establish the importance of internal thinking and the imperative of naming whatever has been described within African feminist ethics research.

African ethics in academia has recently emerged to “define moral concepts derived and derivable from African people” (Wareham 2017, 858). Metz (2017, 340) describes African ethics as “normative theory of right action that has an African pedigree [with] the requirement to produce harmony and to reduce discord, where harmony is a matter of identity and solidarity”. African ethics has focused on “deciding general principles on which terms like ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘duty’, and so on are to be applied to anything and with deciding precisely what these terms mean in the African context, and then in comparison with other cultural frameworks” (Omotoso 2017, 55). This is an important turn towards decolonising morality rather than a process of Africanising morality, which has a sinister undertone of writing Africa into morality, when indeed African philosophy embodies ethics. African ethics has been ventured largely from selected cultural-religious accounts of ethical norms (Mbiti 1969; Kinoti 2010) and individuals’ scholarly reflections (Chimakonam and Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2023) on familial and ancestral basis and the concept of personhood (Molefe 2016).

Wareham (2017, 858) describes “African values, as arguably the most poorly understood and under-theorised set of ultimate goals” across geographic, intellectual and social spaces. By noting the under-representation of fundamental ethical values in African contexts, Wareham points out that “even in African nations that have a strong mandate to transform their institutions, the starting points for transformation are unrepresentative of Africans” (2017, 867). In response to the misconstruction, downplay and under-theorisation of African values, African ethics bridges the gap created by the unjust neglect of African moral ideas by systematically describing and interrogating African moral concepts. It dismantles the overhyping of Western ethics and the uncritical imposition of foreign moral theories on African experiences (Omotoso 2018).

African Feminist Ethics – the “What” Questions

Feminism has been concerned with speaking about problems that have no name and unearthing hidden transcripts (Hanmer 1990; Morley 2006). Theorising African feminist ethics is a response to end the namelessness of problems in feminist studies and specifically in African contexts within “considerations of identity, epistemology and methodology” (Mama 2007, 1), paying attention to “tensions, silences and fractures represented in everyday relations” (Salo 2009, 13). As much as interrogating African ethics addresses the dearth of variety in moral thinking, it has also maintained a male-centric approach thereby sustaining epistemic injustice (Omotoso 2020). A 2023 volume¹ on African ethics, which could have contributed immensely to African feminist theorising, included only token chapters on feminism and sexualities that, unfortunately, did not directly address the “whats,” “hows” and “whys” central to African feminist ethical theorising. This is troubling, considering that the text is described as a guide to key ideas.

Other recent works that have focused on African philosophy have also not done a deep dive into the subject of theorising African feminist ethics, possibly because such studies have a wide range of issues to cover (Murove 2009). In my view, contributing to this is, first, the low number of women African ethical theorists compared with men, and secondly, the methodology employed by many African feminist ethicists, which is often descriptive rather

than normative. As a result, many works that could have paved the way for African feminist ethics theorising invested in descriptions but ignored conceptualisations. Also observed is a large body of scholarly works built on prevalent Western feminist ethical theories even in unpacking women's experiences for, and across, Africa. Subsequently, there is an urgent need for African feminist ethics to offer wider perspectives than are currently available and challenge the debasing questioning of both the knowing capacity (Fricker 2007) and the validity of knowledge produced from/by African women. Here "African women" is a set of categories distinguished by location, biology, marriage and association (Omotoso 2021). More so, these categories do not foreclose how the term "women in Africa" differs significantly from "African women".

For instance, while the third and fourth categories above could be described as women in Africa, women resident outside Africa, though belonging to the first and second categories may be African women but within this context, not women in Africa (Omotoso 2021, 2,064).

This clarification on African women defies the notion that "African" refers solely to those predominantly domiciled in a specific geographical location. It unreservedly transcends the continent due to globalisation and mobilities across the world, thus extending to global Africa. It does not ignore prevalent controversies surrounding African feminism, however, feminists' commitment to the holistic well-being of women in the search for gender equality and freedom from oppression justifies the continuous definitions, description and prescriptions, which are the goals of any feminist theorising.

Theorising African Feminist Ethics – the "Why" Question

Two major dispositions have emerged in African feminist theorising 1) those who describe and prescribe the characteristics of a new ethic but do not proceed to name the phenomenon and 2) those who provide in-depth theorising and attempt its application across issues, specifically where the context of care as a sole category for theorising has been overused or is found inadequate.

As for descriptions, several have appeared in scholarship. For instance, Mercy Oduyoye (1995a, 1995b) and Hannah Kinoti (2010) represent proponents of feminist ethics rooted in theology. Oduyoye's (1995a, 1995b) cultural hermeneutics rooted in Sankofa philosophy are an example of such ethics. Philosophical theorising has followed communal tenets such as *Ubuntu* in Southern and Eastern Africa (Ramosé 1999) and Omoluwabi in West Africa (Dasylyva 2016). Notably, culture remains a key component theorists use to analyse gender relations across African communities (Oluwolé 1997). Likewise, in-depth theorising combines culture to refine existing theories, mostly of foreign origins. For instance, while Gouws and van Zyl (2015, 164) argue that these dominant moral approaches have not addressed women's needs, they subsequently resort to "using concepts developed in a (Northern) feminist ethic of care" synthesised with *Ubuntu* to arrive at their relational ethic of justice. Why the turn to care, as though it were all there is in feminist ethics discourses? In what could have been a radical turn, exploring wider dimensions of *Ubuntu*, Diouf et. al (2023,32) promote "a Black feminist ethics and poesis of care [that] attends to the physical ableist heteronormative, patriarchal space that requires complicity in colonial violences". Are there no new, relevant dimensions to African feminist ethics? I ask, does and can the concept of "care" address all the concerns in African feminist contexts? Diouf et al.'s provocative article retains an undertone that there is more to feminist ethics – the practice of repair; of dealing with erasure; of carers being denied of care; and, in their words, "res(e)t in rest-less-ness" (2023, 40).

Theorising African Feminist Ethics: How Can We Do This?

1. Engaging with the "how" in theorising African feminist ethics, three key issues emerge:
2. Identity – What makes any ethic theory both African and feminist?
3. Nomenclature which recognises the key ethical components that answer to African women's experiences.
4. Intersections and convergences of any "African" feminist ethical theory, since Africa is neither monolithic, nor are women's experiences cast in utmost/absolute sameness.

Musili (2024, 147) notes, “the possibility of constructing home-grown epistemology using decolonising components that are crucial for advancing a just identity and community”. Accordingly, in-depth theorising reveals some African feminist theories including Kinoti’s (2010) ethics of liberation; Omotoso’s (2018, 2023) ethics of vigour; Dieng’s (2023) ethics of care-fulness; and Ipadeola’s (2025) Ancestralism among several hidden others which have not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve. Equally important in this context is a conscious unearthing of ethical principles embedded in earlier African feminist theories, such as Social Transformation Including Women in Africa (STIWANISM), Motherism, Nego-feminism and so on.²

Kinoti’s (2010) ethics of liberation uses three principles – communitarian understanding of care, the vitalness of social cohesion and moderation by spiritual influences within cultures. It gives priority to mutual respect within society using Gikuyu culture to decry all forms of repression and subsequently extend the notion of liberation as applicable across African communities.

Omotoso’s (2018; 2023) ethics of vigour, as a moral philosophy of self-efficacy, covers agency, autonomy, bodily integrity and the importance of women’s voices in ethical discourse. It exemplifies “strength and resilience in struggles towards entrenching justice” (Omotoso 2023, 15). It takes risk, care, control and justice into equal considerations in purely feminist perspectives (Omotoso 2018, 2023) and suggests a reclamation of strength and assertiveness arguing that these traits are not inherently masculine but can be embodied by individuals of any gender. Vigour is reflective of Gqola’s idea of African feminist imagination, which “demands the refashioning of new languages again and again, in conversation, taking risks, unlearning, unburdening and reloading” (2017, 165).

Dieng’s (2023) ethics of care-fulness reflects on epistemological power and privileges in contexts that recognise diversities and intersections. It aims at a mutual support for feminists’ solidarity in decolonising knowledge and encouraging co-production.

Ipadeola (2025, 125) argues that “to achieve balance and equity in African ethics, the strict dichotomy between public and private morality must

be re-examined”. In so doing, Ipadeola presents something close to explicating African feminist ethics only as a part of her feminist African philosophy, leaving room for additional and more specific delving into Feminist African ethics, as much as the other issues. This differentiates between feminist African ethics and African feminist ethics – the former being a specific act of developing feminist-focused African ethics (a task she reserves for philosophers) and the latter being the generalised form, capturing all feminist contexts to ethics for and about Africa. An attempt within the development of feminist African ethics gave birth to Ipadeola’s (2025) Ancestralism as an alternative perspective on how moral actions are formed based on a consideration of both present and future generations, while also centring practices that preserve women’s autonomy and fundamental rights.

These theories need to be engaged with on a wide range of issues, such as health, politics, sexualities and so on, so that they are developed and made available as ethical frameworks to describe women’s lived experiences, prescribing reproducible channels of thinking, diverse viewpoints/debates, and consequently offering possibilities of contestation to afford learning and give room to transforming realities. Notable at this point is the need for African feminist scholars and activists to gain the courage to name the experiences they describe and not leave the descriptions on the table for strangers to name. Theorising African feminist ethics requires a critical embrace of idea critiquing with the sole aim of expanding and improving proposed frameworks. African feminist theorising aims to expand the possibilities for conceptualising, understanding and redefining Afrofeminist futures from glocal perspectives. This is important considering the (im)mobilities, migration and the dispersal of African women, as well as the nostalgic and extaligic³ (Olaoluwa 2024) impacts this continues to have on all spheres of women’s lives.

Conclusion

Theorising African feminist ethics is a decolonial turn, aligning with Musili’s (2024, 147) view that “decolonial theories protest the normalized, internalized patronizing epistemologies that impede just identities”. More than before, moral theorists, in which moral is broadly construed as including descriptive and normative disciplines, have a duty to engage with and actively explore

African feminist moral ideas. Wareham (2017) suggests a gradual movement from descriptive to normative ethics. This is inexhaustive if it is not applied to answer salient questions – what and/or how would African feminist ethics contribute to addressing deepening moral decadence across spheres in Africa? Such a gradual movement should seek to bridge the gap between description and prescription, creating space for idealistic pragmatism (Omotoso and Razak 2015) where the practical does not discount feminist ideals.

African feminist ethics theorising recognises care but transcends the notion of care as a “one cap fits all” solution. Within the abundant descriptive research, “if African women are to successfully challenge their subordination and oppression, they need to carefully and rigorously develop home-grown conceptualizations that capture the specific political economies and cultural realities encountered, as well as their traditional worldviews” (Tamale 2020, 43). African feminist ethics must now come to terms with filling the gaps before, between and beyond care.

Notes

1. See Chimakonam, Jonathan O. and Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2023). I believe that such an important text on African ethics should provide a chapter covering the basics of African feminist ethics.
2. On the politics and contestations of naming, see Ampofo et al. (2008) and Alkali et al. (2013).
3. Extalgia is a developing concept in migration studies focused on those left behind in the homeland. See Olaoluwa (2024) for details.

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