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Theorising African Feminist Ethics

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Editorial

Theorising African Feminist Ethics

Sharon Adetutu Omotoso and Akosua Adomako Ampofo

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[1] 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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Of Place and Space: Towards a Phenomenological Foundation for African Feminist Ethics

Victoria Openif'Oluwa Akoleowo

Abstract

In this article, I explore the possibility of providing a phenomenological foundation for African feminist ethics. This approach derives from two factors. First, the inadequacies of existing ethical frameworks in addressing the specific challenges African women are confronted with, including but not limited to the challenges of colonialism and poverty. The second is contemplation on the nature and/or features of African feminist ethics as one premised on the notion of gender as a space, defined in terms of its universal gender categories characterised by affective performativity and power relations; or as a place, characterised by unique sociocultural production of roles within a specific locality. Given that phenomenology deals with subjective experiences, I argue that a phenomenological approach, rooted in the lived experiences of African women, offers a unique and valuable perspective on ethical issues relevant to their lives. In this approach, the voices, perspectives, and experiences of African women are central to understanding and addressing ethical issues, thus, ensuring the promotion of their agency, empowerment, and well-being through the recognition of their lived experiences and the development of appropriate and effective ethical frameworks that respond to the unique challenges such lived experiences generate.

Keywords: African women's experiences, ethical frameworks, gendered space, phenomenology, sociocultural ethics.

Introduction

African feminist ethics is an emerging field of research, as noted by varying calls for its development in recent times, including this issue of *Feminist Africa* dedicated solely to theorising the meaning, nature, and scope of this field. As a field of research, it is premised on the need to address the unique moral concerns and challenges faced by African women. Its aim is to investigate and address ethical issues within specific African cultural, historical, and social contexts, from African feminist perspectives (Omotoso 2018). While it shares some concerns with Western feminist ethics espoused in the ethics of care, it differs in its considerations of race, place, and socioeconomic conditions (Olojede 2020).

African feminist ethics emphasises the particularities of African women's experiences as shaped by the legacies of colonialism, systemic poverty, and patriarchal structures. Colonialism, in particular, imposed foreign value systems that disrupted indigenous African moral philosophies, which, themselves, marginalised African women (Mangena 2009). Additionally, the socioeconomic challenges that many African women face, including limited access to education, healthcare, and political representation, further complicate the application of traditional ethical theories to their lived realities.

Thus, there is a growing need to develop an ethical framework that not only recognises but also prioritises these unique experiences and perspectives of African women, making African feminist ethics a crucial area of scholarly inquiry (Mangena 2009). Such a framework would be one where lived experiences of African women, especially in the context of postcolonial and patriarchal societies, are emphasised. I argue that such a framework can be found in the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology.

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that emphasises the study of conscious experience from the first-person perspective. It focuses on lived experiences – the subjective, personal experiences of individuals – to gain insight into how people perceive and interpret their world. As such, it stands out as a viable approach to African feminist ethics and its need for a methodology that is more context-specific and culturally relevant. In this way, it offers a robust framework for understanding the complexities of African women's lives, in lieu of traditional Western feminist ethical theories that have

failed to capture the nuanced experiences and perspectives of African women (Chilisa and Ntseane 2010).

This phenomenological approach is particularly valuable for two main reasons: 1) it helps address the ethical and transformative challenges African women face in navigating and resisting patriarchal power structures; and 2) it enables African feminist approaches to construct knowledge that is deeply rooted in the social and cultural contexts of African communities, thereby filling conceptual gaps left unresolved by Western gender theories.

This work undertakes the task of developing an African feminist ethical framework in four sections. In the first, it evaluates calls for African feminist ethics as a distinct discourse. Here, it examines justifications proffered for this distinct field of ethics. The second section provides an examination of phenomenology and its philosophical underpinnings. In this section, I interrogate how phenomenology challenges the traditional objective approach to reality through its claim that reality is always perceived through the lens of individual experience and how this challenge has been variously applied, including in the field of ethics. The third section examines the concept of gender from two dominant perspectives, "space" and "place", to argue that while the notion of gender as space provides a pivotal understanding of how power operates through gender norms, examining gender as place is essential to account for the cultural and historical specificities of gender relations that are often neglected in gender-as-space research. The final section, therefore, proffers phenomenology as a theoretical framework for African feminist ethics, grounded in its essential nature as a methodology that emphasises embodiment, situatedness, and the intrinsic sociality of subjectivity (Daly 2018).

In Pursuit of African Feminist Ethics

Historically, ethics has been dominated by androcentric perspectives that have marginalised women's contributions and experiences (Friedman and Bolte 2007; Friedman 2020). However, the emergence of autonomous feminist moral theories, heralded by Gilligan's 1982 seminal work, *In a Different Voice*, has challenged these androcentric attitudes and their marginalisation of female moral reasoning through upholding abstract moral principles that are

traditionally associated with male reasoning (Lloyd 1993). Gilligan's "care ethics", in particular, contrasts these traditional "ethical theories of justice/principles" with a relational ethics of care, arguing that the former falls short of its claim to universality because it overlooks the realities of everyday moral decision-making (Gilligan 1982).

In a similar vein, African philosophers who grapple with the challenge of a Eurocentric hegemony in the teaching of philosophy on the continent have called for a decolonisation/Africanisation of the philosophy discipline. However, there is no consensus on how to achieve this, partly due to the paucity of scholarly writings in the field of African philosophy (Chimakonam and Ogbonnaya 2021). This claim might seem controversial given the volume of work done by scholars like Abraham, Gyekye, Oruka, Sodipo, Mbiti and Wiredu among others. However, these writings are insufficient to teach students African philosophy. Teaching a decolonised curriculum of African philosophy in African universities demands an appreciable volume of materials (textual and oral) that students can interrogate under the varying branches of African philosophy. While significant progress has been made in publishing works in this field, it is not yet *uhuru*. This is particularly because most available research materials revolve mainly around the debate on the existence of African philosophy, rather than providing a more systematic exposition of this discipline in terms of its core branches, themes, and concepts.

One branch of African philosophy where significant scholarship discourse is evident, is African ethics, in which scholars have proposed ethical theories based on cultural philosophies. *Ubuntu* is a well-known theory within this branch, serving as an ontological and ethical framework for reflections on Afro-communitarianism, with its emphasis on the importance of community and relationships, encapsulated in the idea that "a person is a person through other persons" (Tutu 2007, 3). Ubuntu offers a unique perspective on moral reasoning and decision-making by prioritising actions that honour communal relationships, reduce discord, and promote harmony. It is closely related to Gilligan's care ethics through its relational nature and, as an ethics that values interdependence, fellowship, reconciliation, and harmonious relationships, is distinctively contrasted with Western ethical frameworks that prioritise individual autonomy and rights.

However, while Western feminist movements have made significant strides in developing ethical frameworks such as the ethics of care, African women still struggle to find their place and voice within the field of African ethics. Current ethical frameworks, both global and local, have fallen short in addressing the specific challenges African women face. These frameworks tend to be either too generalised, lacking sensitivity to the unique cultural and social contexts of African women, or too narrow, failing to encompass the diverse experiences within African societies. This diversity in African women's experiences derives from a multitude of factors, including ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, education, urbanisation, age, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and colonial history. As examples, regional differences mean the experiences of women in North Africa might differ compared to those in sub-Saharan Africa; urban versus rural settings affect access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, legal rights, and technology, resulting in differing experiences even within the same region; and political stability and conflict areas also influence the lives of women living in different or similar localities.

Consequently, it is easy to recognise the limitations faced by existing ethical frameworks. For instance, while efforts to promote gender equality have been significant, they frequently fail to account for the intersecting factors of race, culture, sexuality, and economic status, which are crucial to understanding African women's realities. Race, for example, while largely neglected in contemporary African feminist discourse, remains a relevant consideration, as seen in McFadden's encounter with the "blatant assumption that African women could not possibly be intellectuals" (2002, 1). In recounting this encounter at an academic conference where she had presented her paper, she notes that she was questioned on her intellectual capacity and authority to speak on African women in a scholarly gathering, a query borne out of a racist resistance to the "incursions of an African woman into the academy, a space seen to belong primarily to white men, some white women, a few black men and certain 'Others' – with the exception of radical African feminists" (McFadden 2002, 1).

Conversely, African traditional ethics, while culturally relevant, continue to marginalise African women through the patriarchal structures embedded in moral philosophies such as Ubuntu, which, while emphasising community and

collectivism, often reinforce gender hierarchies (Mangena 2009; Oyowe and Yurkivska 2014). The next section briefly considers these inadequacies.

Ubuntu and care ethics

The ethics of care is characterised by relationality, emotions, and sociality. Propounded by Gilligan, it was further developed by philosophers like Ned Noddings (1984) to satisfy the demand for inclusivity in moral philosophy. In contrast to traditional Western ethical theories which are premised on an impartial approach to moral decision-making, care ethics focuses on moral decision-making within relational contexts rather than relying on abstract principles or rules (Gilligan 1982). Emphasising the importance of care and responsibility in human relationships, it highlights that humans are inherently dependent on each other, with a natural desire to both care for and be cared for. This interdependence underscores the significance of relational care in moral decision-making. Rather than relying on abstract principles, care ethicists argue that emotions such as empathy, love, and sympathy are essential to ethical reasoning (Noddings 1984). They also aver that moral deliberations require an awareness of the complexities of moral decision-making and must therefore involve contextual and sensitive reasoning processes to unravel such complexities.

African ethics is both descriptive and normative, given its documenting of the moral beliefs and practices of African peoples and its prescription of how individuals and communities ought to live. Premised on a robust communitarian ontology, it refers to the diverse yet coherent set of moral principles that prioritise the following: a communitarian foundation, where moral value is grounded in collective welfare; relational personhood, where moral status is tied to fulfilling social obligations; virtue orientation, the focus on character cultivation; narrative moral transmission sustained through oral traditions; and the holistic integration of moral, spiritual, and cosmological concerns (Hampâté Bâ 1972; Menkiti, 1984; Gyekye, 1997; Bujo, 2001).

These moral principles define ethical behaviour in terms of obligations to foster harmony, mutual respect, and collective well-being. In so doing, they emphasise communalism and relationality, as well as collective well-being over

individualism, although scholars like Gyekye argue that the latter does not entail the erasure of individual agency. Gyekye's "moderate communitarianism" serves in this light as an attempt to reconcile communal values with individual rights, with its assertion that African ethical systems, while deeply relational, inherently recognise personal autonomy and moral responsibility within the framework of shared humanity (Gyekye 1997).

While distinct from its Western counterpart, African ethics is also comparable to it, as "moral thought in African cultures, as a reflection of communalism, has features of rationalism, naturalism, humanism and rational authoritarianism", features also found in Western notions of ethics (Ikuenobe 2006, 3). The main distinction is that these moral principles provide normative and applied responses to the question "what/how ought *we* to do?" rather than "what/how ought *I* to do?" As such, African ethics is properly situated within the framework of communalism, where morality is rooted in the interconnectedness of individuals within a community, an interconnectedness exemplified by the Ubuntu concept (Ikuenobe 2006).

Ubuntu, as an ontological and ethical concept, encapsulates the African communal belief that personhood is dependent upon the community. For Ogude, it is premised on the idea of relational personhood (2019). To be a person (*umuntu*) is to participate actively in communal life, fulfilling roles that sustain collective well-being. Imafidon defines it as "a discursive formation and relationality framework between the individual and the community that emphasises building communities, interdependence, solidarity, equilibrium, and communal harmony as great goods" (2022, 5). It is a dominant ethical framework in sub-Saharan Africa that prescribes conduct that exhibits solidarity, underpinned by values, ideals, and practices that underscore "prizing communal relationships, harmony, hospitality, social cohesion, friendliness, compassion and interdependence" (Ewuoso, Fayemi and Aramesh 2021, 2). Based on these ideals, values, and practices, Ubuntu is regarded as an inherently relational philosophy, one that is premised on the achievement of communal self-realisation through the promotion of harmony. This is the fundamental nature of Ubuntu, the humanness realised through others – that one is a person through others because of the communal nature of humanity (Tutu 2007).

Elvis Imafidon outlines four principles embedded in Ubuntu philosophy that foster solidarity and togetherness. These are the principles of interdependence, relational hermeneutics, ontological equilibrium, and the inclusion of difference (Imafidon 2022). The principle of interdependence emphasises the fundamental social nature of humans. No human is born fully formed; all humans depend on other humans in their process of becoming human. Ultimately, living a meaningful life and achieving self-fulfilment involves building meaningful relationships with others who are, in this sense, indispensable to the achievement of these goals (Imafidon 2022).

The principle of relational hermeneutics holds that identity and understanding are intersubjective – shaped through relational and contextual interactions (Imafidon 2022). This principle emphasises that a person's self-concept is not solely self-determined but is influenced by how others perceive them. For example, one's role as a leader or caregiver gains meaning through communal recognition. Imafidon (2022), therefore, argues that interpretation is inherently collaborative, challenging purely subjective or isolated views of identity. This aligns with Ubuntu's focus on communal dialogue and shared meaning-making.

The ontological equilibrium principle derives from systemic inequalities that disrupt human interconnectedness, creating a moral and existential disequilibrium. As an example, colonialism dehumanised Africans by framing them as "subhuman", severing their connection to the universal human community. This disequilibrium is readily addressed with Ubuntu's principle of relational hermeneutics, which advocates for mutual recognition as a means of restoring the distorted balance.

The fourth principle is the inclusivity of difference principle. Diversity is central to Ubuntu's vision of community. While humans depend on one another, their needs and contributions vary. However, this variation does not imply hierarchical distinctions (e.g. race, class), but instead, values differences as enriching the community. For example, a child's need for care and an adult's need for companionship are equally valid, fostering a community where unique individuals coexist without domination. Inclusion ensures that unity does not erase diversity but thrives because of it.

These four principles form the basis of Ubuntu as humanness and serve to justify the Afro-communitarian view that personhood is socially constructed and sustained through ethical communal engagement.

Care ethics, Ubuntu, and African feminist ethics

As ethical frameworks, Ubuntu and care ethics share many parallels, offering vital critiques of Western individualism through a "feminine worldview" centred on relationality, positioning them as counterpoints to patriarchal, Eurocentric moral theories (Harding 1987; Ikuenobe 2006; Mangena 2009; Cornell and Van Marle 2015). Yet, despite their emancipatory potential, uncritical adoption of either risks perpetuating the very gendered and colonial hierarchies they ostensibly oppose. Ubuntu's communal ideals, though aspirational, frequently mask systemic gender hierarchies. In Ogude's explication, for instance, while he acknowledges the possibility of interpreting Ubuntu to imply the erosion of individual agency, he also recognises "its embeddedness in known traditions" (2019, 17). These known traditions are often patriarchal, with women's roles and identities circumscribed to caregiving and domestic labour, as mothers, wives, or daughters. These roles then form communal expectations that inadvertently validate systems in which women's personhood is contingent on fulfilling gendered duties, the resultant effect – a devaluation of African women's labour and agency.

Similarly, care ethics' valorisation of empathy and nurture risks essentialising women as "natural" caregivers, reinforcing the same gendered burdens it seeks to critique (Wolff 2018; Ipadeola 2020; Jenkins 2020). This is compounded by the lack of support or recognition of the importance of such caregiving roles and, consequently, the societal undervaluation of caregiving roles and the exploitation of women who may be forced into caregiving roles without adequate support or recognition (Kuhse 1995; Patil 2018).

This paradox is stark in Imafidon's concept of patriarchal opportunism: African societies celebrate women's care labour as a communal virtue yet exploit it to sustain male dominance (2018). Even in light of the diversity of African women's experiences, shaped by factors such as cultural traditions, economic status, and access to education, in most African societies, women are

tasked with "sustaining the community" as mothers and caregivers, but remain excluded from ethical discourse and leadership (Manyonganise 2015; Oyeleye 2018). Thus, despite Ubuntu's layered dimensions, its relational hermeneutics, which define identity through communal recognition, become a tool of subordination when patriarchal norms dictate whose voices matter.

Both frameworks, Ubuntu and care ethics, also neglect the structural dimensions of gendered oppression. Care ethics' focus on interpersonal relationships obscures systemic issues like economic inequality and institutionalised misogyny (Omotoso 2018). Similarly, Ubuntu's emphasis on harmony risks silencing dissent, pressuring women to prioritise communal cohesion over challenging inequity (Kayange 2020). This mirrors critiques of care ethics' myopia: by framing care as an individual virtue, it overlooks how neoliberal capitalism extracts unpaid care labour from women, particularly in impoverished contexts (Zou, Nie, and Fitzgerald 2020).

The coloniality of gender further complicates this. Western feminisms often universalise care ethics, erasing African women's unique struggles against neo-colonial extractivism and religious fundamentalism (Tamale 2020). This is also evident in discourses on an Ubuntu ethics premised on conventional patriarchy where care is gendered. As Harding (1987) notes, African women remain largely absent in both care ethics and Ubuntu's relational conception of the human, rendering their lived experiences invisible. Diouf, Dyer, Ecclesiastes, and Gilbert (2023) also elaborate on this erasure and how it ensures that Black and African women remain on the periphery as observers. In response, they advocate for reclamation of Ubuntu as a decolonial initiative where care is repositioned not as gendered duty, but as a reciprocal, liberatory, and power-aware practice, a political and collective responsibility.

In light of these criticisms, African feminist scholars have theorised the need for an African feminist ethics that transcends the limitations of both Ubuntu and care ethics. Such an ethical framework will, in a rejection of essentialism, recognise the intersectional nature of African women's realities – borne from the convergence of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy – while reclaiming indigenous epistemologies. It is on this basis that I argue that such an African feminist ethics is best developed through an integration of phenomenological insights to arrive at a context-sensitive approach to address

the diverse, and sometimes conflicting, experiences of African women across different cultural and socioeconomic contexts (Mangena 2009; Omotoso 2018; Olojede 2020). This, I aver, would allow for the reclaiming of African women's moral agency. In the next section, I examine what phenomenology has to offer to this search for an authentic African feminist ethics.

On the Idea of Phenomenology

Announced by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century, phenomenology introduced a philosophical shift towards analysing phenomena and lived realities, moving away from abstract metaphysical debates. This approach enabled philosophers to explore varied human experiences by focusing on how phenomena appear (Cohen 1987). Described as the study of appearances, phenomenology evolved into a broader movement encompassing diverse themes, characterised "as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer" (Moran 2000, 4).

Central to phenomenology is its emphasis on lived experience as a pathway to grasping reality (Heidegger 1962). Rather than relying on external observations or abstract frameworks, it investigates how individuals perceive, interpret, and derive meaning from their interactions with the world, aiming to uncover the essence of these experiences. Contrary to Cartesian dualistic ontology, phenomenologists argue that the human body constitutes an embodied consciousness through which people perceive and interact with the world. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 94) avers, "(t)he body is the vehicle of being in the world". This is the notion of embodied subjectivity, a rejection of the Cartesian duality of mind and body in favour of an integrated account of how perception, cognition, and intersubjective relations emerge from our situated, physical engagement with our environment. In simpler terms, one does not just live as a disembodied entity, a mind, stuck in the body. Rather, one lives as a body in the world, with all understanding of and interacting with the world occurring through one's physical being. One's bodily existence is

fundamental to how one perceives and interacts with the world; thus, it is impossible to detach fully from our embodied perspective.

This is the pivot of the phenomenological approach to investigating reality; in lieu of explaining experiences using causal or scientific frameworks, it adopts descriptive or/and interpretive approaches to capture the essence of experiences as they are lived. These approaches focus on the importance of subjective perception and the lived experience of individuals in their everyday environment. Such approaches have, in recent times, been inculcated into feminist research. As espoused in the works of de Beauvoir (1949), Butler (1993), Alcoff (2000), Young (2005), Ahmed (2006), Tamale (2020), and Diabate (2020) among others, they form a key element of theoretical insights into the lived experiences of women, particularly in African contexts.

Feminist scholars have critically adapted phenomenological embodiment theory, challenging Husserl's gender-neutral assumptions about bracketing lived experience (Oksala 2016). They reject the notion of a universal disembodied subject, arguing that traditional phenomenological accounts reflect privileged male perspectives instead. By employing phenomenological methods, these scholars examine how women specifically experience embodiment, sociality, and world-hood. In doing so, many of them have appropriated Merleau-Ponty's (1962) rejection of pure transcendental phenomenology, with its emphasis on how consciousness emerges through situated bodily practices rather than existing a priori.

At this juncture, it is necessary to briefly examine the implications of a universalist versus particularist approach to gender to understand phenomenology's embodied perspective. This perspective helps to explain how universal structures of experience are manifested in particular, bodily experiences by showing how our physical interactions with the world contribute to the synthesis of universal and particular realities.

Gender as Space and/or Place

The concept of gender has long been a cornerstone of social organisation, shaping human interactions, institutions, and cultural norms across time and space. While gender roles and identities vary significantly across cultures, the

existence of gender differentiation itself can be viewed as a universal category. Every society, regardless of its historical or geographical context, operates with some form of gendered distinctions, whether rigid or fluid. This universality suggests that gender functions as a fundamental "space" through which social life is structured. This notion of a "gendered universe" or gender as a universal social category is found in the works of scholars like Mama (2001), Bakare-Yusuf (2003), and Apusigah (2008), who argue that gender, as a social construct, operates universally, although its manifestations and specifics, its expressions, norms, and hierarchies, are deeply contingent on local contexts, reflecting what might be termed gender as place. This duality of gender as both universal space and culturally specific place forms the crux of this section.

Gender as space

Judith Butler's (1988) *Gender Trouble* revolutionised understandings of gender by framing it as a performative act, a series of repeated gestures, behaviours, and norms that produce the illusion of a stable identity, rather than as a fixed biological or social category. For Butler, gender is a space of affective performativity, a universalising construct that transcends geographical boundaries. Even as societies differ in how they codify masculinity and femininity, the very act of codification – of creating distinctions between genders – reveals a shared human tendency to organise social life through gendered lenses. This universality does not imply uniformity but rather highlights gender's role as a foundational axis of social structure, influencing everything from family dynamics and labour divisions to political representation and cultural symbolism. Given this article's focus on African feminist scholarship, it is essential to note at this juncture, the debate on gender as a universal social category in African feminist scholarship. This debate, heralded by Oyěwùmí (1997), revolves around rejections and acknowledgements of the universal nature of gender by African feminist writings. It is aptly captured by Boyce-Davies (2014, 85) who weighs in by asserting that the rejection of this universal nature of gender, that is, gender as space, "is an analysis which defies basic logic regarding the nature of humankind, the ways that societies were stratified before and after colonialism".

In this "gendered universe", gender operates as a social space in the Lefebvrian sense. Credited with introducing the notions of space and the possible as interpretative concepts into academic discourse, Henri Lefebvre's (1974) *The Production of Space* presented an attempt at defining "all possible spaces, whether abstract or real, mental or social" (299). For Lefebvre, space is not merely a physical container, but a socially produced construct shaped by values, practices, and meanings embedded in human relations. As a dynamic social construct shaped by power relations and social struggles, space can be understood in terms of three interconnected dimensions: perceived/spatial practices (the actual, tangible reality of space as it is experienced and perceived); conceived/representations of space (conceptualised, abstract, and mental constructs of space as represented in ideas and knowledge); and lived/representational spaces (space as it is experienced and inhabited). While perceived/spatial practices and lived/representational spaces both refer to the tangible reality of space, they differ in how space is engaged and how it is understood. Perceived/spatial practices refer specifically to the tangible, material engagement with space in everyday living, including walking down streets and working in workplaces, all habitual and measurable activities that showcase how space functions and how it is maintained through regular practices. Lived/representational spaces, on the other hand, refer to how space is felt and interpreted/imaginatively experienced. This includes symbolic and cultural meanings attached to spaces in memories, which allow for space to be meaningful beyond its physical form and the practices associated with such physical forms.

Applying this triad to gender, the universal aspect of gender as space aligns with Lefebvre's representations of space. Gender norms are institutionalised through laws, religious doctrines, and educational systems, creating a global framework that legitimises certain roles (witness male breadwinners, female caregivers). These norms are reinforced through spatial practices, that is, everyday acts like the gendered division of labour or clothing. For example, in Maasai culture in Kenya and Tanzania, men predominantly control cattle herding, a role tied to wealth and prestige, while women's labour involves domestic chores such as milking and childcare. Similarly, among the Igbo in Nigeria, Isi-Agu clothing, which signifies power and authority, is traditionally restricted to men (Madukasi 2018; Kereto et al. 2022). The

institutionalisation of such norms results in the universalisation of gender into binary oppositional categories (male/female) and their subsequent imposition as a global norm. Colonialism weaponised this abstraction by encoding Victorian gender roles into African legal and educational systems, thereby erasing pre-colonial fluidities. This is evident, for example, in the British colonial government's appointment of male market leaders in Yoruba markets, a measure that effectively sidelined established female leadership. Such interventions were premised on the notion of "women as Victorian models of weakness and inferiority, both in the public and private spheres, ably guided by their male 'masters'" (Akoleowo 2021, 198). The replacement of matrilineal land inheritance with patrilineal ownership, as seen in the Intestate Succession Law of Ghana, which contravened the matrilineal system of inheritance of the Akan people, is a prime example of how such binary oppositional gender norms and roles relegated women to domestic perceived spaces while men dominated the public sphere (Awusabo-Asare 1990).

Yet Butler and Lefebvre both caution against viewing universality as static. Butler's performativity underscores the instability of gender categories, while Lefebvre emphasises space as a site of contestation. Thus, the gendered universe is not a monolithic structure but a dynamic, contested space where universalising tendencies clash with localised reinterpretations.

Gender as place

In contrast, the concept of gender as place emphasises the sociocultural production of gender within specific contexts. Here, gender is not a transcendent category, but a lived reality shaped by historical, cultural, and environmental factors. For instance, the female husbands and male daughters of the Igbo people of Nigeria illustrate how gender identities and roles are negotiated within particular cultural frameworks (Amadiume 1987). This localised understanding resonates with Lefebvre's representational spaces – the lived, symbolic dimensions of space that reflect cultural meanings. Gender as place is embedded in the lifeworld of communities, where traditions, oral histories, and rituals encode gender norms. For example, in many African societies, gender roles are tied to agrarian cycles, ancestral veneration, and communal rites. Among the Igbo, the *Omu* (a female traditional leader) holds

authority in specific sociopolitical contexts. Similarly, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, women occupy significant leadership roles, including that of female *Obas,* as well as the *Iyaloja*, an experienced and respected market woman who represents the collective interests of market women and the *Iyalode*, a female chieftain who serves as an intermediary between the market women and the male-dominated political establishment. These fluid gender roles serve as examples that challenge Western notions of male-dominated leadership (Uchendu 2002). Such roles are not mere deviations from a universal norm but expressions of gender as place; rooted in specific histories and ecologies.

The particularist paradigm in African philosophy, which centres cultural worldviews (Chimakonam 2015), aligns with this localised understanding. However, as Harding (1987) warns, romanticising "place" risks essentialising African traditions by obscuring their patriarchal underpinnings. For example, as noted above, Ubuntu's communal ethos often masks the spatial practices that burden women with unpaid care work while excluding them from ethical discourse.

The tension between gender as space (universal) and gender as place (local) raises critical questions for African feminist ethics: how can universal principles of gender justice coexist with culturally specific values? What ethical frameworks emerge when African women's lived experiences are centred? What are the likely implications of this distinction on the possible features or nature of African feminist ethics? In light of a dual nature, what then should an African feminist ethics look like? What should be its primary concern? How should such an ethics be configured? The synthesis of these two theories is central to this discourse: Lefebvre's triad of space and the phenomenological emphasis on embodied experience as implied in the call to centre African women's voices and perspectives in African feminist ethics (Bakare-Yusuf 2003). While the latter derives from the recognition of the hegemonic overtones of both male-centric African ethics and Western feminist ethics in contemporary moral discourse, the former suggests a situated universalism for African feminist ethics – one that acknowledges shared struggles (e.g., patriarchy, economic marginalisation) while respecting the plurality of cultural solutions.

Towards a Phenomenological Foundation for African Feminist Ethics

Phenomenology, as briefly outlined above, has proven to be a valuable, yet controversial approach to feminist theory. It is particularly notable for its contributions to the development of feminist ethics, which seeks to address the moral dimensions of women's lived experiences in light of feminist ethics' advocacy for a more situated and context-specific understanding of morality (Mapp 2008; Daly 2018). An example of this fruitful relationship between phenomenology and feminist ethics is found in de Beauvoir's (1949) seminal book, *The Second Sex*. Here, de Beauvoir uses the phenomenological concept of embodiment to interrogate sexual difference. Most significant to this discourse is that she explicitly cites Merleau-Ponty's claim that the body is a historical rather than natural fact in developing her thesis that the "woman" is made, not born. Sara Heinämaa emphasises this when she asserts that *The Second Sex* is "a phenomenological inquiry into the constitution of the meaning of sexual difference" (Heinämaa 2003, xiii).

African feminist ethics benefits from Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied subjectivity, the claim that the subject and object of experience are intertwined in a way that cannot be completely separated. Perception is an active, embodied process that is always partial and situated. There is no pure, detached standpoint from which to observe the world; thus, consciousness is in a state of continuous engagement with the world. In this sense, African feminist ethics can be realisable as an ethics foregrounded on the phenomenological core of women's lived experiences. This core implicates the universalist against the particularist (or vice versa) undertones of the foundation of feminist ethics within the enterprise of African philosophy. This undertone is evident in the recognition of African feminist ethics' nature as one premised on the reality of a gendered universe and also in its particularised nature as a specific local universe of gender.

The gendered universe reflects African feminist ethics' nature as one premised on a universal understanding of what it means to experience the world in an embodied way (Mann 2018). To live with such an understanding implies living in recognition of the fact of sexual difference in the first instance, devoid of material or cultural contexts. This is closely related to

phenomenology's notion of the pure ego unencumbered by facticity. However, in addition to this spatial understanding, African feminist ethics must also foreground a racialised and colonised narrative of a specific universe of gender (Bertolt 2018). Here, it is grounded in the realities of African women's lives. This platial turn signifies African feminist ethics' phenomenological concerns with explicating moral issues from an embodied perspective – as African women in an African lifeworld (Janz 2007). African feminist ethics in this manner presents as 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). This nature highlights the critical role of the integration between place and space in the formation of African feminist ethics. While place refers to the sociocultural and historical context in which individuals find themselves, space represents the broader structures of power and normativity that shape gender relations. This intersection of place and space plays a significant role in shaping African feminists' moral perspectives and can be seen in how African women negotiate their gender identities within the constraints of both local cultural norms and global gender discourses (Oyěwùmí 1997; Nzegwu 2006).

African feminist ethics also benefits from Lefebvre's triadic model, which elucidates the tension between the global and the local. For African feminists, this triad reveals that gendered spaces (e.g., domestic roles, public exclusion) are not neutral but are produced through colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist systems. African women's experiences, whether navigating market spaces, performing labour or facing exclusion from political forums are both spatially and corporeally mediated. The activities of the Pelewura-led Lagos Market Women's Association during the colonial administration in Nigeria provide a historical example of this dynamic. Confronted with the reality of the conceived and lived spaces, African feminist ethics must operate as a third space, synthesising universal critiques of patriarchy with platial reclamations of indigenous knowledge. It is on this basis that I proffer a phenomenological approach to African feminist ethics that emphasises how racialised gendered experiences shape moral understanding and reveal the subtle ways in which patriarchal structures influence moral agency and decision-making.

First, an African feminist ethic must be anchored in the lived realities and sociocultural matrices specific to African women, eschewing abstract

universalisms, like the idea that there is a common understanding of gender inequality and a shared goal of women's liberation across diverse African contexts, in favour of situated ethical frameworks (du Toit and Coetzee 2017; Tamale 2020). Central to this project is a critical engagement with communitarianism and its privileging of relationality, collective well-being, and interdependent moral agency. However, this commitment demands a dialectical interrogation, for communitarian ideals, while offering counterpoints to Western individualism, risk reifying structures of gendered subordination when uncritically deployed. As Oyeleye (2018) demonstrates through her analysis of moral socialisation, cultural narratives often weaponise communitarian values to naturalise patriarchal hierarchies, inscribing gendered binaries (e.g. submission as a feminine virtue, courage as a masculine ideal) through systemic indoctrination.

Consequently, an African feminist ethic must adopt a decolonial praxis that destabilises hegemonic discourses while centring the polyvocal experiences of African women. This necessitates a twofold intervention: first, a hermeneutics of suspicion directed at institutionalised practices, from customary laws to religious norms, that codify patriarchal authority under the guise of cultural authenticity (Chilisa and Ntseane 2010); second, a reconstructive project that reimagines communitarianism through an intersectional critique of power, as Eze (2014) contends. Such an ethic transcends mere reform, demanding instead a radical reconfiguration of the epistemic and material conditions that sustain gendered oppression, thereby transforming ethical theory into a tool of emancipatory praxis.

Using the communitarian framework as an example, Telesia Musili (2024) argues that centring humanism is foundational to constructing a communitarian feminist ethical framework that resists gendered marginalisation. This principle anchors interpersonal relations in the recognition of each individual's inherent dignity, fostering ethical engagement grounded in mutual respect rather than instrumentalisation. By prioritising intrinsic human worth, such a framework challenges hierarchical power dynamics embedded in traditional communitarian models, enabling a reimagined collectivism that harmonises communal solidarity with feminist emancipatory praxis. As Musili argues:

> Practice and adherence to this principle seal all avenues for discrimination, stigmatization, and exclusion, since, at the center of it all is a call to interpersonal relationships that includes all. Though communitarian, acting this form of morality invites self-introspection when deciding the action to be undertaken. The internalized values and cultivated virtues guide the subject in opting to respectfully help those in need and liberate those at the (fringes) of lack, domination, and oppression (2024, 148).

African feminist ethics must also concern itself with acknowledging the diversities prevalent within the African space, orchestrated by African societies' encounters with historical developments such as colonialism and the influence of Abrahamic religions (Bakare-Yusuf 2003). This requires a nuanced ethical framework that integrates both indigenous, pre-colonial moral systems and the diverse moralisms born from these historical interactions. Grounding ethical discussions through this phenomenological approach allows for the incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems and values, leading to a more contextual and relevant ethical framework for African feminism.

Furthermore, African feminist ethics must challenge the dominant masculinities prevalent on the continent. These masculinities often valorise virility in men, even when it leads to harmful behaviours like non-consensual sex, while stigmatising women for expressing sexual agency outside traditional norms. Such ideologies perpetuate systemic marginalisation by idealising submissive women and dismissing those who assert their agency. Consequently, women are frequently portrayed as victims rather than rights holders in cases of injustice (Gouws and van Zyl 2015). African feminist ethics must deconstruct these hegemonic structures to empower women as active agents of change, rather than passive recipients of aid.

Importantly, African feminist ethics must be distinctly informed by feminist perspectives that challenge androcentric moral theorising. Historically, African feminist scholars have faced testimonial injustice, where certain moral concepts, such as care and motherhood, have been essentialised as intrinsic to women's nature (Imafidon 2018). This essentialisation can perpetuate exploitative gender roles and relations, for example, where maternal care for the community is regarded as a self-fulfilling duty for the woman, which, if done, engenders the well-being and survival of the community, and, if ignored, harms the community, regardless of what the woman wants. To counter this,

these concepts must be redefined in non-exploitative ways, fostering a shift in societal attitudes towards greater respect for the diversity of African women's experiences and contributions. In this manner, African feminist ethics emerges as a framework grounded in the lived realities of African women, with its acknowledgment of their multifaceted identities and experiences.

The issue of systemic poverty is also a pivotal concern that must be integrated into the development of a feminist ethical framework for African women. Poverty constitutes one of humanity's most pressing moral challenges, as it fundamentally undermines the values that define a minimally decent human life globally (Lötter 2007). This reality is starkly illustrated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's portrayal of Wanja in *Petals of Blood*, which highlights that poverty often leads to moral compromise as a means of survival, rather than a result of immorality. In Africa, women are disproportionately affected by systemic poverty due to entrenched structural and cultural inequalities, which exacerbate their vulnerability to economic hardship and social exclusion. These inequalities are perpetuated by patriarchal systems and discriminatory practices that limit women's access to resources and opportunities and further compounded by the legacy of colonial capitalist economies that disrupted pre-colonial economic systems in which women held significant economic power. These structural inequalities result in the feminisation of poverty in Africa, a phenomenon where women disproportionately experience poverty (Wanjala 2021).

Addressing the feminisation of poverty requires African feminist ethics to prioritise the perspectives of poor African women. This involves tackling structural discrimination as a means to reverse the moral decay caused by poverty. Moreover, African feminist ethics should serve as a platform for advocacy, leveraging frameworks to create impactful campaigns that resonate with the specific needs and realities of African women. For instance, advocacy efforts focused on reproductive rights or economic empowerment can be strengthened by incorporating testimonies and narratives from African women, thereby highlighting the ethical dimensions of these issues (Lugones 1987). Consequently, feminist ethical responses to contemporary challenges in African societies, such as climate change, migration, and economic globalisation, must be grounded in a commitment to inclusivity and empowerment. This ensures that African women are not merely protected by

but also actively engaged in shaping the ethical landscape of their societies, fostering a transformative environment in which their voices and agency are central to decision-making.

Conclusion

This article has critically examined the limitations of traditional ethical frameworks in addressing the specific challenges faced by African women. By privileging universalised gender categories and abstract moral principles, these frameworks often overlook the intricate and context-specific realities of African women's lives, as shaped by diverse sociocultural, economic, and historical contexts. The failure of conventional ethical theories to account for these complexities results in theoretical and practical gaps, leaving African women's experiences marginalised within both feminist discourse and ethical philosophy.

In response to these shortcomings, I have proposed a phenomenological foundation for African feminist ethics, one that centres the subjective experiences of African women and situates ethical reasoning within their sociocultural contexts. This work draws on phenomenological philosophy, which prioritises individual consciousness and embodied experience to ground ethical inquiry in the concrete realities of African women's lives, such as their roles as caregivers, economic providers, or community leaders, rather than abstract ideals. With a focus on how African women perceive and navigate their worlds, this framework affirms African women as epistemic agents whose narratives, histories, and embodied knowledge are central to ethical reasoning. Thus, it is both culturally relevant and attuned to the specific needs of African women.

Through the lens of gender as space versus gender as place, this article demonstrates that African feminist ethics must account for the layered geographies of women's lived realities. In this framework, gender as space refers to gender as a universal category of social organisation, a structuring principle present across human societies that shapes roles, relationships, and distributions of power. As a form of social architecture, it defines the contours within which individuals act and interact, yet it remains open to negotiation and reconfiguration in response to shifting political, cultural, and historical

conditions. By contrast, gender as place captures the particular, localised manifestations of these organising principles, the sedimented cultural, historical, and institutional arrangements that anchor gender in specific contexts, shaping and often constraining the possibilities for action.

A phenomenological foundation allows these two dimensions to be held in productive tension, illuminating how African women navigate between the universal structuring logics of space and the culturally specific constraints of place. It reveals the moral significance of both resistance and adaptation and underscores the importance of attending to how these dynamics play out in everyday life.

This framework resists static, universalist definitions of gender, instead treating it as a lived, spatially and temporally situated phenomenon. In doing so, it reframes ethical inquiry not as the application of abstract principles to passive subjects, but as an attentive engagement with the ways African women inhabit, transform, and sometimes subvert the spaces and places that structure their lives. In making this conceptual pairing central to African feminist ethics, the article equips the field with a flexible, context-sensitive lens for ethical reasoning. It provides a generative space for imagining new ethical horizons, ones that affirm African women's agency, honour their cultural contexts, and align with the broader struggles for gender equity, decolonial justice, and the transformation of moral philosophy itself. In doing so, it not only contributes to African feminist thought but also reshapes the global discourse on feminist ethics, ensuring that the moral concerns of African women are not peripheral but foundational to the pursuit of social justice worldwide.

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Feminisms that Feed Us: African Feminist Ethics, Everyday Resistance, and the Futures of Development

Janet Husunukpe

Abstract

This paper centres the voices of grassroots women, exploring their role in socioeconomic development through resistance strategies rooted in indigenous knowledge and ethics of reciprocity. Drawing on empirical engagement with grassroots women and activists in Northern Ghana, as well as interviews with feminist scholars, I argue, firstly, that ethics of reciprocity and acknowledgement of local knowledge are central to these women's resistance. Secondly, their resistance practices exemplify how agency is exercised in challenging socioeconomic structures and embody the principles of African feminism and feminist ethics, principles rooted in local context and critically relevant for broader feminist theorising and praxis. Thirdly, their experiences illuminate the tensions between external development frameworks and local resistance practices, highlighting the complexities of grassroots-led socioeconomic transformation. Exploring how women collectively resist alienation entails identifying contextual practices of resistance rooted in shared histories, cultures, and values which African feminisms emphasise. By attending to the material and kinship economies that sustain life, I position grassroots women's organising as a crucial site for reimagining futures. These feminist practices feed us materially and epistemologically – offering visions of survival that exceed the limits of mainstream development thought.

Keywords: African feminisms, Indigenous knowledge, ethics of reciprocity, grassroots women, feminisms

Introduction

Grassroots women are essential to the urban and rural fabric of communities in sub-Saharan Africa (henceforth Africa), through their economic, social, and political engagements and contributions. Despite their critical role (Boserup 1989), they experience socioeconomic alienation. For context, Fordham et al. (2011) define grassroots women as economically, socially, and politically marginalised women from low-income communities. Bagasao (2016) views them as rooted in everyday duties yet systematically excluded from decision-making. I characterise grassroots women as marginalised women at the community level who actively engage in addressing socioeconomic alienation through organising, leadership, and sustained unpaid contributions to development. They use their lived experience, knowledge, and networks to drive change from the ground up. In Ghana, grassroots women comprise working-class women in rural, peri-urban, and low-income urban communities who are excluded from formal power but play vital roles in sustaining local economies, families, and social networks. They face intersecting challenges shaped by gender, geography, and unequal access to resources, and at the same time are active agents of change, organising to secure livelihoods through everyday practices of care, mutual support, and collective actions.

It is precisely within these practices that the discourse of African feminisms and ethics find grounding. African feminisms provide vital frameworks for resisting intersecting oppressions across race, class, sexuality, patriarchy, and global imperialism (Tamale 2020). They affirm values like interdependence, collective well-being, and community preservation (Knowles 2024; Chisale 2018; Wane 2011b). Emerging from lived realities, African feminist ethics emphasise care, agency, intersectionality, and relationality. I admit that, referencing "Africa" broadly risks oversimplification, as Bakare-Yusuf (2003) cautions, due to the continent's cultural and linguistic diversity. However, this framing is intentional. Tamale (2020) argues that shared histories of slavery, colonialism, and oppression have fostered a common political struggle across African nations. Building on this, I contend that grassroots women in Ghana, like many across the continent, have developed collective strategies in response to systemic oppression and patriarchy. Still, as Bakare-Yusuf (2003) reminds us, we must account for differences shaped by specific

histories and sociocultural contexts. Therefore, understanding how Ghanaian grassroots women resist socioeconomic marginalisation requires attention to practices rooted in their distinct yet interconnected histories, situated knowledge, cultures, and values – principles central to African feminisms.

African feminisms and ethics hold the potential to reshape development in Africa profoundly, yet their influence remains largely underexplored in mainstream development studies. This oversight is particularly concerning given the shortcoming of Western development models, which neglect the needs of impoverished communities. Wane (2011b) argues that externally imposed development approaches often fail to align with local realities. Extending this critique beyond the continent, Roy (2009), Collyer et al. (2019), and Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) highlight how the dominance of Western scientific knowledge as the singular legitimate epistemology marginalises indigenous perspectives, particularly those of women and other marginalised groups. In light of this, the assumption that grassroot women lack theoretical or intellectual insights must be decisively rejected. On the contrary, their lived experiences, situated knowledges, and relational practices constitute vital epistemologies that should inform, shape, and lead development discourses and practices.

Building on this critique of exclusionary knowledge systems, my analysis centres the agency of Ghanaian grassroots women in Northern Ghana working in tandem with activists and positions their resistance as both a challenge to systemic marginalisation and a vital contribution to African feminist ethical debates. Drawing on empirical engagement with grassroots women participating in a Women in Agriculture programme and social enterprise in Northern Ghana, I analyse their economic survival strategies and informal support networks. In doing so, I illuminate that ethics of reciprocity and upholding cultural values that challenge domination and are central to this resistance. To contextualise these grassroots strategies within wider political and ideological frameworks, I examine the role of grassroots activists who navigate aid politics and community development, either engaging with or resisting neoliberal structures. These activists, with ties to grassroots organising, serve as intermediaries between communities and development institutions, negotiating power dynamics. Their experiences highlight the tensions between external development frameworks and local resistance practices, revealing the

complexities of grassroots-led socioeconomic transformation. I also engage with African feminist scholars, whose work challenges dominant Western narratives and provides frameworks for understanding grassroots resistance. Their theorising helps articulate how grassroots women's resistance is shaped by historical and cultural contexts, rather than being subsumed under Western feminist or neoliberal frameworks. This scholarly perspective does not overshadow grassroots voices but, rather, amplifies their strategies within broader intellectual debates and offers a critical lens for rethinking dominant development paradigms.

From this multi-layered analysis, I propose two key dimensions of grassroots resistance: (i) ethics of reciprocity and (ii) upholding cultural values that challenge systemic marginalisation. These insights directly engage with ongoing debates in African feminist ethical theorising, particularly regarding the adequacy of homegrown feminist ethics in addressing contemporary challenges. By centring grassroots women's lived experiences and engaging activists and scholars as interlocutors rather than dominant voices, this paper demonstrates how African feminist ethical frameworks are both contextually grounded and future-oriented. The resistance strategies of these women illustrate how ethics are contextualised within power relations, agency, and collective responsibility. Their actions reveal a fluid interplay between indigenous ethical traditions and adaptive, forward-looking strategies, challenging rigid distinctions between past and future ethical orientations.

African Feminisms and Ethics

African feminisms, as both theoretical and practical frameworks, draw from the continent's indigenous knowledge systems (Bádéjọ 1998; Oyěwùmí 2004; Taiwo 2003; Tamale 2020). This knowledge is holistic, non-static, nonlinear, and qualitative. Wane (2011a) emphasises that African feminisms reflect the integrative nature of African indigenous knowledge systems, where spiritual, ethical, and collective dimensions of knowledge-making coexist. Knowles (2024) adds that this integration is essential for understanding the world and offers a necessary critique of colonial, neoliberal, and patriarchal structures that have long influenced knowledge production. As theories, Bakare-Yusuf (2003) emphasises that African feminisms specify and analyse how African women's

lives intersect with a plurality of power formations, historical blockages, and encounters that shape their experiences across time and space. African feminisms reclaim the continent's rich histories, amplify the indigenous values of women, and challenge domination as they relate to patriarchy, class, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and imperialism.

Feminist ethics, as a philosophical inquiry, focuses on moral issues relating to women's everyday lives and experience, especially in relation to nurturing and caregiving (Mangena 2009; Cole and Coultrap-McQuin 1992). Okpokwasili (2024) highlights that feminist ethics emerged to address the limitations of traditional moral frameworks in tackling gender inequality, offering a lens that centres women's voices, experiences, and concerns. In the African context, specifically in Southern Africa, the concept of *Ubuntu* offers an ethical lens that aligns with feminist ethics. Knowles (2024), Chisale (2018), and Tamale (2020) demonstrate how Ubuntu, as an African philosophy, is rooted in social and kinship networks and promotes values of care, respect, and compassion. This framework advocates for a collaborative and inclusive approach to knowledge production. Within this philosophy, individuals are defined through their relationships and connections with others and with the earth. This philosophy informs an African feminist ethics, or what Mary Kinyanjui (2019) terms *utu* feminism, that is deeply relational, grounded in care, nurturing, and solidarity. Like African feminisms and ethics, *utu* logic emphasises women's indigenous knowledge, labour, and agency, which challenge dominant state and patriarchal structures and offer an alternative epistemological and ethical order rooted in African feminist thought (Kinyanjui 2019; Dyer 2024).

Globally, care has been central to feminist ethical thinking. Gilligan (1977) identifies caregiving as a moral response often associated with mothering. However, Bakare-Yusuf (2003) and Mbilinyi (1985, 1994) challenge the centrality of "mothering", arguing that it risks essentialising women's roles, excludes the diverse identities of women, and makes feminist ethics vulnerable to co-optation by patriarchal and capitalist systems that exploit social reproduction. In the indigenous African contexts, however, mothering is not confined to biological kinship. It is enacted as a collective, interdependent practice involving extended family and the broader community, reflecting a communal ethic of care. For Steady (1987),

motherhood symbolises the generative and life-sustaining force of society, grounded more in spiritual and symbolic significance than in material or economic power. This broader understanding of caregiving resonates with practices in other marginalised communities globally, where shared caregiving and mutual aid serve as vital strategies for survival under structural neglect.

The emphasis on Indigeneity has also provoked critical debates about the boundaries and inclusivity of African feminisms, particularly in relation to class, urbanity, and diasporic identities. Dosekun (2019) challenges the positioning of feminisms within indigenous contexts, arguing that such frameworks can sometimes reinforce anti-elitism and class inequalities. By focusing primarily on rural women in poverty, this approach risks erasing the shared experiences and concerns of women across socioeconomic backgrounds and falsely presumes that urban women in Africa do not experience some form of marginalisation. African feminisms, Dosekun (2019) argues, must resist essentialism and avoid romanticising or dictating notions of Africanness or African womanhood, recognising the multiplicity and complexity of women's experiences across the continent, including the intersections of race, ethnicity, and other dimensions of marginalisation. Despite divergent perspectives, African feminisms and ethics must remain responsive to the specific conditions shaping women's lives. Chisale (2018), Tamale (2020), and Mohammed (2023) stress the importance of contextualising African feminisms. Mohammed (2023) contends that a radical feminist praxis must be intersectional, centring marginalised voices. Focusing on Ghana, Apusigah (2004) notes that women navigate multiple, intersecting forces – cultural, political, religious and geographical – that shape their actions and inactions. Recognising these layered oppressions is essential for dismantling patriarchy. As Hassanain and Sidig (2024) emphasise, differences in ethnicity and class deeply shape feminist organising and homogenising women's struggles under a singular agenda erases local, urgent concerns.

Against the backdrop of African feminism and ethics, I turn to the case of Ghana to examine how grassroots women actively challenge socioeconomic inequalities through everyday practices of resistance. In particular, I highlight how women draw on the ethic of reciprocity, a core value within many indigenous communities and a central tenet of African feminisms and ethics, as a foundation for care-based, collective responses to socioeconomic

exclusion. Centring practices of care as intentional strategies of resistance exemplifies how African feminist ethics can be operationalised to confront socioeconomic alienation.

Grassroots Women in Ghana

The socioeconomic marginalisation of Northern Ghana has deep roots in colonial policies that prioritised the south for cash crop production and wage labour, while designating the north as a labour reserve (Akurang-Parry 2010). This spatial and economic inequality persisted after independence, as successive governments reinforced uneven development. In recent decades, neoliberal policies, marked by privatisation and market-led growth, have deepened regional disparities and gendered exclusions, especially, as Apusigah (2009) notes, for grassroots women whose livelihoods depend on the land. Apusigah (2004) further emphasises that access to resources like capital remain significantly lower for women in Northern Ghana compared to Southern Ghana. This disparity contributes to what Pearce (1978) terms the "feminization of poverty" – a condition shaped by economic and intersecting systems of gender, geography, and systemic neglect.

The feminisation of poverty is especially visible in Northern Ghana, where grassroots women remain central to agricultural production yet are excluded from decision-making and denied access to land and capital (Apusigah 2004, 2009). Apusigah (2004, 2009) emphasises that customary norms restrict women's inheritance rights, limiting their cultivation largely to non-staple crops such as legumes and vegetables. Adomako Ampofo and Atobrah (2023) add that the colonial shifts towards cash crop economies further marginalised women by privileging men's agricultural authority and knowledge. In response, many women diversify their livelihoods through handicrafts, wage labour, and dry-season gardening, often supported by NGO food security initiatives. Despite structural barriers, women continue to negotiate space by leveraging male labour on family plots (Apusigah 2009) and organising through kinship, friendships, and informal networks for mutual support (Adomako Ampofo and Atobrah 2023).

The resistance of Ghanaian grassroots women should be understood as part of a long continuum of feminist struggle. From the pre-independence period to the present, women across Ghana have organised against socioeconomic exclusion, drawing on indigenous practices, collective labour, and transgenerational strategies of survival and protest (Awumbila 2001; Manuh 1993; Tsikata 1989; Britwum 2017; Torvikey et al. 2024; Odoi and Baidoo 2024). Torvikey et al. (2024), drawing on a feminist political economy lens, offer a compelling account of grassroots women salt miners along Ghana's southeastern coast. Their collective resistance challenges the encroachment of capital on their livelihoods and community ecologies. Historically, salt production in these coastal communities was governed by communal, ritualised, and gendered systems of exchange, grounded in reciprocity, collective labour, ecological stewardship, and upholding indigenous values. These indigenous values included the prohibition of people from winning salt during certain months until rituals were performed to announce the beginning of the season. However, the imposition of large-scale industrial extraction, driven by state-capital alliances and neoliberal development imperatives, disrupted these systems, dispossessing women of both economic agency and cultural authority. In response, grassroots women mobilised a repertoire of embodied, symbolic, and material forms of resistance across public protests, press conferences, direct occupation of contested mining sites, and threats of naked protest. Notably, the threat of naked protest, a culturally embedded and gendered act of dissent, functions as a repudiation of patriarchal moral orders and an assertion of feminist political agency and insurgency. Such practices challenge patriarchal norms of decorum and exert moral pressure on state and corporate actors.

Beyond physical spaces of protest, Ghanaian women also leverage digital platforms to resist patriarchal norms and reconfigure feminist solidarities. Odoi and Baidoo (2024) highlight how digital activism emerged as a vital terrain for feminist organising around issues of bodily autonomy, identity, and intersecting oppressions linked to gender, class, religion, and tradition. Through digital media, women amplify their voices within national discourse and forge transnational networks of solidarity that transcend localised struggles. Complementing this digital turn, Neely (2017) examines feminist cultural production as another important site of resistance, particularly

within Ghana's creative sectors. Here, women deploy collaborative strategies – such as shared economies, mentorship, and advocacy – to challenge exclusionary norms and cultivate inclusive, feminist spaces. These acts of solidarity expand the terrain of feminist politics beyond formal institutions into creative and cultural domains, demonstrating how grassroots agency is exercised through both material struggle and symbolic production.

Methodology

Building on the theoretical and contextual groundwork laid in the preceding section, I now turn to how grassroots women in Northern Ghana mobilise ethics of reciprocity as a strategy of resistance against socioeconomic alienation. I draw on the work of Apusigah (2009) to inform an analysis that highlights how two categories of grassroots women in Northern Ghana employ ethics of reciprocity as they navigate their livelihood. My first category focuses on grassroots women in farm-based households in a rural community a few kilometres from the region's urban capital, Tamale, while my second category focuses on grassroots women in non-farm-based households in Tamale. In my first case, I engaged in a group discussion with 13 grassroots women farmers with ages ranging from 25 to 52 years. As Apusigah (2009) affirms, grassroots women in farm-based households in Northern Ghana optimise their farming skills by engaging in direct cultivation and playing key roles in NGO-led food security initiatives such as dry season gardening. Similarly, the 13 grassroots women farmers I engaged with are participants in an NGO-sponsored agriculture project. Their limited access to critical resources for production are reflected in their farm production which focuses on non-staples like soyabeans, groundnut, and vegetables. The NGO-sponsored agriculture project, funded through international development streams, offers agricultural training and resources aimed at improving crop yields and economic outcomes for women farmers. Our group discussion centred on ascertaining their experience and agency within their social network and community. Particularly, I engaged them to learn more about the programme: their day-to-day agricultural activities, benefits from the project, the difficulties they experience, and how they navigate said difficulties. This was followed up with one-on-one interviews and home and farm visit observations to gain unbiased opinions from outside of

the group and make visible their individual experiences and values. I elaborate on these in my discussion.

In my second case, I conducted participant observation and engaged in an in-depth interview with the founder of Song-Ba Empowerment Centre, a social enterprise in Tamale. Apusigah (2009) draws our attention to how women in non-farm-based households, unable to undertake crop cultivation, engage in non-farm activities, like trading, handicraft-making, and hiring out their labour, which is necessary to generate income to support their household. Song-Ba Empowerment Centre exemplifies how grassroots women in non-farm-based households resist socioeconomic alienation through ethics of reciprocity. While this analysis draws from the perspective of the founder and my observation of the enterprise, it does not claim to reflect the views of all grassroots women. Rather, it offers a situated example of how African feminist values of care and reciprocity are enacted within one localised initiative.

To further contextualise these practices within feminist and development discourse, I also conducted interviews with four activists in Northern Ghana, all of whom operate at the intersection of grassroots organising and formal development institutions. My interviews with activists centred on how they navigate the politics of and access to aid in our current neoliberal settings. I asked about their community engagement initiatives. Their insights revealed the ongoing tensions between grassroots agency and donor accountability, and the challenges of centring indigenous ethics within models of development. These activists navigate complex spaces of negotiation, where efforts to amplify women voices are often shaped by the conditionalities of international funding, illustrating how grassroots resistance is entangled with global power relations.

Finally, I interviewed two feminist scholars whose works engage deeply with grassroots women's struggles. Their contributions helped frame the data within African feminist theoretical traditions, emphasising the generative capacity of grassroots practices to shape new knowledge formations. My group discussions, interviews, and observations highlight grassroots women's agency within systems of marginalisation and shed light on how African feminist ethics is evolving in response to changing economic and environmental pressures.

With the exception of Rhoda, the founder of Song-Ba Empowerment Centre, all names are pseudonyms.

As a feminist researcher, acknowledging and reflecting on my positionality is integral to both the research process and my interaction with participants. Positionality is not fixed but fluid and contextual (Folkes 2022; Reyes 2020), requiring continuous reflection on power dynamics, privilege, and shared or divergent experiences. Throughout this study, I navigated the complexities of being both an insider and an outsider, recognising how my background, identity, and academic training influenced my engagement with different participant groups. My positionality was shaped by several factors: I am a young, cisgender Ghanaian woman with a Western-influenced education, raised in Northern Ghana in a household considered middle-class by local standards. In my interviews with feminist scholars and activists, my national identity, educational background, and shared experiences as a somewhat Western-trained Ghanaian woman facilitated rapport. However, during focus group discussions with grassroots women from rural Northern Ghana, my sense of insider status was quickly challenged. While I shared a regional and national identity with them, my academic privilege and middle-class background set me apart. This encounter emphasised the role of intersectionality in shaping research relationships and the need to engage critically with the complexities of insider/outsider dynamics. I remained attuned to power imbalances and actively worked to create spaces where grassroots women felt comfortable to share their experiences on their own terms. For example, during group discussions with grassroots women farmers, I stepped back from leading the discussion and allowed a respected woman leader and peer to co-facilitate in the local language.

Ethics of Reciprocity

I structure this section around two interconnected sub-sections. The first sub-section under the theme "kinship-based economies" focuses on my engagement with grassroots women farmers in the Women in Agriculture programme, highlighting their success stories, challenges, and the centrality of nurturing and kinship ties in overcoming challenges. Under this sub-section, I illustrate how family support systems play a crucial role in women's

socioeconomic advancements, shaping their ability to navigate structural inequalities. The second sub-section, under the theme "collective care and mutual support networks" focuses on the Song-Ba Empowerment Centre, highlighting solidarity and mutual support in its day-to-day operation. I also bring in the voices of activists, examining their role in fostering socioeconomic advancement. This section explores how both grassroots women and activists navigate neoliberal development frameworks while drawing upon indigenous values and solidarity-based practices.

Kinship-based economies

The Women in Agriculture project reflects Oppong and Abu's (1987) *Seven Roles of Women* as participants navigate multiple roles – mother, partner, farmer, kin, and community member – often simultaneously. They blur the line between productive and reproductive labour, linking caregiving, economic work, and collective well-being. For instance, during the group discussion, the women cited family cohesion and meeting their children's needs as key motivations, while relying on extended family's support during farming challenges. Fatima, a middle-aged grassroots farmer, expressed the following:

> I planted rice and when I harvest it, I sold some to buy soap and water to wash their [her children's] clothes. Every morning, I cook the rice for my children to go to school and when they return, they eat the leftover. I also use some of the money from the sold rice to give to my children for school and take care of the house.

Amina, also middle-aged, added:

> I planted groundnut and though I did not get [harvest] as much as I expected because of the rain, I was able to sell some and used the money to buy school uniform and other school supplies for my children. I hope to harvest more next year so I can buy bicycles for my children to go to school because the school is quite far.

The concept of family extends beyond the nuclear unit to include broader kin networks, reinforcing collectivist approaches to caregiving and economic responsibility. Participants often cared for children of deceased relatives, highlighting the presence of kinship-based care in their socioeconomic

practices, wherein obligations to extended family are integral to household and community survival.

Similarly in a playful moment, a participant, who had grown fond of me, joked about encouraging her husband to marry me so I could become her "sister wife". While light-hearted, the comment revealed how women actively navigate marriage and kinship ties in everyday socioeconomic interactions. Still, it is crucial to avoid romanticising polygamous arrangements, as lived experiences within polygamous households vary significantly. Regardless of marital structure, broader family dynamics highlight the centrality of reciprocal support, as women both provide for and receive help from extended kin. This case parallels Clark's (1999) analysis of Asante women. She notes the figure of the good, self-sacrificing Asante mother, who works outside the home to feed her children, reflecting the dominant bond of motherhood in everyday life. Like the Asante women Clark reflects on, the ability of the women farmers to sustain their families through agricultural livelihoods emphasises the intersection of gender, labour, and care work, and reaffirms the broader significance of kinship-based social and economic resilience within grassroots communities.

While we acknowledge the intersection of gender, labour, and caregiving as vital for socioeconomic development, it is necessary to mention that the neoliberal states often co-opt these roles to mask structural neglect of marginalised communities. Taking the Women in Agriculture project as a case in point, women are positioned as key agents of development, yet the state withdraws from providing basic infrastructure or childcare support leaving women to fill the gaps. This phenomenon has been documented by Miraftab and Huq (2024) who note that marginalised women are often coerced into invisible and unpaid labour, under the guise of "good mothering", compensating for state withdrawal from social welfare. Tsikata (1995) also shows how the Structural Adjustment Programmes' policies in Ghana depend on the unpaid labour of women to compensate for the absent social state. Mbilinyi (1985, 1994) further argues that patriarchal ideology compels women to shoulder household and family responsibility from their cash earnings under the construction of "motherhood" and "wifehood". While these critiques highlight the co-optation of caregiving, grassroots women's strong sense of collective belonging and communal values remain central to their actions, revealing the complexities of resistance.

Collective care and mutual support networks

Drawing on Rhoda's insights, I further illuminate how care, mutual support, and social networks are woven into the daily functioning of the Song-Ba Empowerment Centre's enterprise, revealing care as a vital strategy of resistance and collective survival among grassroots women from non-farm households. Originally established as an NGO, the centre trained its first group of young grassroots women and mothers in shea butter production, reusable sanitary pad making, and fabric weaving, aiming to promote sustainable livelihoods. Alongside skills development, trainees received education in business management, loan access, and digital marketing. They earned income during training, with the aim of becoming self-sufficient within six months to a year. To support future ventures, trainees were encouraged to save or reinvest part of their earnings from product sales to build seed capital.

Although the organisation began with the goal of training grassroots women to start their own businesses, it has evolved into a social enterprise. Past trainees now serve as business partners, recruiting new trainees and offering the same skills training and business education. The enterprise operates on the principle that business partners (past trainees) purchase raw materials for production, and finished goods are sold in an established showroom. Once trainees acquire the necessary skills, they become members or business partners. As of 2022, 19 graduates have established independent businesses and begun training others. At that time, the centre had 47 trainees, 42 in fabric weaving and five in shea butter production. Members actively recruit others from their networks, reflecting a community-centred approach that rejects neoliberal individualism. Past trainees support newcomers by sharing knowledge, resources, and opportunities. These practices exemplify what Knowles (2024) and Chisale (2018) identify as caregiving and communal knowledge-making central to moral and social life – an approach grounded in the values of Ubuntu. The centre reflects these values through community-building efforts that emphasise mentorship, skill-sharing, and knowledge transmission, merging ethics of reciprocity with strategies for social transformation. Rather than passively receiving aid, these women emerge as critical agents, using collective action and mutual support to confront systemic marginalisation. Their practices reinforce that resistance extends beyond overt

political mobilisation, manifesting in everyday acts of care, solidarity, and communal upliftment.

Extending this discussion, the activists I engaged with also highlighted mutual support, care, and social networks as central to grassroots activism. They noted that financial and material resources often stem not just from international donors but from personal funds, social networks, and collaborative efforts within coalitions. An activist described activism as a form of ministry, dedicating her life to supporting women and girls despite having her own career to pursue. Others spoke of personal sacrifices, often relying on their savings and networks to sustain initiatives.

> We have organised four campaigns so far, and we raised the donations from family and friends. I have not really received donation or funding from any organisation or like international organisations, because I personally wanted to do this on my own. I mostly rely on volunteers and friends and we work full time, so it is sacrificial. Most of my team members are women, so we brainstorm and discuss how to support these girls. – (Activist one, Sanitary Pads for Girls Project).

> It [activism] came [to me] because of an inherent passion and my financial difficulty growing up. I experienced what it felt like to be disadvantaged. Most of the women I work with also happened to be my mom's friends, but unfortunately, my mom has passed away now, but the women are like mothers to me. The programmes are now not limited to women alone; it includes other people in the communities. – (Activist two, founder of Women in Agriculture, non-profit project).

The pooling of human and material resources reflects values of reciprocity and care. While grassroots women enact these values in their everyday lives, the activists interviewed expand them into organised movements. Investment in the well-being of others encapsulates African feminist values, where care and mutual support are fundamental. Activists' experiences with inequality, particularly under oppressive systems, motivate their work, reinforcing African feminisms' focus on collective struggles through personal and community action.

Upholding Indigenous Practices and Cultural Values

Like ethics of reciprocity, indigenous practices and cultural values remain vital resources through which grassroots women navigate socioeconomic challenges. Here, I draw on discussions with grassroots women farmers alongside insights from African feminist scholars to highlight the significance of amplifying indigenous practices. The first sub-section examines how grassroots women manage agricultural projects using local knowledge and collective practices, resulting in more sustainable outcomes. The subsequent sub-section engages with feminist scholars whose work provides a foundation for understanding grassroots resistance. They articulate how women's strategies emerge from historical and cultural frameworks that challenge and extend beyond Western feminist and neoliberal paradigms.

My discussion with the farmers showed that when grassroots women actively manage their own farmlands, the results are more sustainable. The Women in Agriculture project supports this by working directly with women on their own farms, providing training and inputs to improve yields. This contrasts with earlier NGO-led projects that were run on centralised farms and excluded women from key decisions. As Hamdia puts it:

> Some people came five years ago and set up a farm by the dam. They came and introduced tomatoes, jute leaves, and okra. It was like a teaching programme: they showed us how to do the planting on that farm and when we harvested, we were given the harvested vegetables to cook. We did not plant on our farms or do the planting ourselves. But in this new programme [Women in Agriculture], we plant on our own family lands, and we have an agriculture extension officer who assists in getting rid of pest and our husbands and the older people in our family help us to farm from time to time. You know they have been farming for years, and they also know the land very well. When they see some mistakes, they come and correct it.

This shows a shift towards centring women's autonomy and their connection to their own land. By encouraging farming on ancestral lands, sharing knowledge through kinship networks, and using traditional practices passed down through generations, the current project better aligns with sociocultural dynamics. However, this approach may still reflect elements of a top-down model. While women farm on their own land and exercise some autonomy, their dependence on NGO-provided inputs and funded training suggests a

continued influence of externally driven projects. NGOs, as Miraftab (1997), Tvedt (1998), Elyachar (2002), and Pieterse (2001) argue, often function within neoliberal frameworks that seek to mitigate, rather than transform, the very social problems neoliberalism produces. NGO partnerships may remain crisis-focused, addressing immediate needs while leaving broader structural inequalities intact (Mohan and Stokke 2000; de Wit and Berner 2009). This reliance raises questions about how grassroots resistance may remain entangled within the paradigms it aims to disrupt. Perhaps, Eddouda's (2024) study of local women farmers in Morocco reflects similar complexities of resistance in relation to land reforms as women farmers exhibit values and norms that disrupt feminist resistance. For Apusigah (2004), women's everyday experiences are shaped by culture as well as wider social, political, religious, economic, and even geographical forces. Their lives unfold within contested spaces of negotiation and struggle.

Amplifying Narratives of Indigenous Practices

> During an outreach project, the person [an elitist activist working with the women's group] said to the women, "If you women agree with me, we are going to work towards scrapping bride wealth." But the women in the community said, "It would be very difficult for us to achieve that; my bride price was paid, same as my mother, so how can my daughter marry for free? They will not respect her." Then the activist turned to me and said, "They insist we have to continue to have bride wealth, unfortunately, we are working with these people who cannot think beyond their noses." I was livid. – (Activist three, member of larger network).

Amplifying narratives of indigenous practices remains central to grassroots resistance, as it challenges dominant discourses that marginalise non-Western knowledge systems and foster ethical frameworks grounded in lived experience. For instance, the notions of bride wealth and sanitary products illustrate tensions with Western narratives dismissing traditional practices as regressive, reinforcing a binary between the past and a presumed progressive future. The feminist scholars and activists highlight how reusable sanitary cloths, historically used across communities, have been pejoratively labelled as "rags" in Western discourse. This framing reflects Eurocentric epistemologies that delegitimise indigenous knowledge while promoting dependence on

commercial products, thus commodifying basic needs and reproducing global inequalities. The endurance of such narratives, sometimes echoed by local actors, complicates grassroots resistance. As the above quote shows, even some African activists inadvertently reproduce these framings, revealing how internalised Western discourses generate tensions within feminist activism itself.

Rather than simply signifying ownership of women, bride wealth restructures kinship ties and claims to children within marriage. This also reflects a broader reality in some communities in Northern Ghanaian communities, where a woman's identity is not confined to wifehood but shifts across multiple, fluid social positions shaped by relational and contextual dynamics. A woman simultaneously performs both male and female roles, depending on her relationship to others. For instance, the Western distinctions of "uncle" and "aunt" do not apply neatly here. Maternal aunts are considered mothers and take on maternal responsibilities towards their nieces and nephews, while paternal aunts are regarded as fathers and fulfil paternal roles. These kinship configurations demonstrate a relational understanding of identity, care, and familial obligation rooted in indigenous ontologies. Moving beyond the singular concept of wifehood, women embrace a fluid and context-dependent understanding of their roles within the extended household. The diverse identities within certain communities indicate the flexibility and adaptability of African feminist ethics.

Similarly, the kitchen, within indigenous feminist practice, is not merely a domestic space but a site of power and agency for women (Ekejiuba 1995). In many African societies, women control food storage and distribution, with the kitchen and granary serving as key domains of authority. Taiwo (2003) critiques Western feminist theories for sensationalising African women's experiences while failing to account for the nuanced political economies in which they act. Practices such as food distribution and household governance are not evidence of disempowerment but rather expressions of a relational feminist ethic that prioritises care over consumption and collectivism over individualism. The kitchen, often rendered as a site of female oppression, functions within many African societies as a key space of resource control, decision-making, long-term planning, and intergenerational knowledge

transfer. Here, power is not enacted through formal institutions but through embedded ethical negotiations.

Amplifying these practices emphasises the agency of grassroots women, illustrating how their strategies of resistance are part of an evolving, context-driven praxis. Practices such as the use of reusable sanitary cloths, often derided as unsanitary or regressive, are amplified within African feminist praxis as acts of sustainable, anti-capitalist resistance. These cloths are not merely relics of the past; they signify self-reliant, future-oriented strategies that resist the commodification of menstruation and the imposition of unsustainable and extractive global supply chains.

Taken together, these practices constitute a dynamic, indigenous epistemology – fluid, collective, and oriented toward survival and transformation. They articulate their own visions of progress, ones that redefine the ethical foundations of economic autonomy and environmental sustainability. Their amplification creates new ethical paradigms that bridge past wisdom with future possibilities. This ongoing negotiation between tradition and transformation is key to reshaping how we understand empowerment, resistance, and development.

Conclusion

The resistance strategies of grassroots women in Ghana illustrate African feminisms and ethics as a lived practice that counters socioeconomic exclusion. While African feminism, as both ideology and movement, reclaims the continent's rich histories and asserts the value of women's knowledge in challenging patriarchal, racial, sexual, and class-based forms of domination, African feminist ethics, as a philosophical approach, centres care, agency, intersectionality, and relationality as frameworks for resistance. The actions of grassroots women farmers, women of the Song-Ba Empowerment Centre, and activists challenge Western development models by drawing on shared knowledge that resists marginalisation, reaffirming shared agency, or fostering collective care. These ethics of reciprocity are not abstract; they are mobilised through grassroots action, such as women supporting each other through savings networks and mentorship. In production, reproduction, and care work,

women mobilise inherited wisdom. For example, women farmers draw on knowledge from spouses and elders within their kinship networks to guide their farming activities. In contrast, women in Song-Ba Empowerment Centre's social enterprise adapt to changing urban realities by sharing skills in digital marketing and strategies for accessing loans. Across these spaces, they build networks of mutual support that connect traditional wisdom with new opportunities, linking experiences to future survival and growth and reflecting a dynamic interplay between inherited wisdom and adaptive, forward-looking strategies. These lived realities and practices demonstrate that African feminist ethics are dynamic, context-responsive, deeply rooted in everyday struggles, and negotiated in response to current material conditions, offering a rich site for theorising lived, adaptive forms of resistance. Their agency must therefore be recognised both as a force that safeguards values and knowledge, and as a foundation for building futures rooted in justice, collective care, and inclusive models of development.

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African Feminist Ethics of Co-Creation: Researching Women's Peacemaking in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Marie-Rose Tshite

Abstract

As a Congolese peace scholar-activist, I draw on interviews with 36 women involved in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue peace process to reflect on the ethical as well as epistemological challenges of researching women's peacemaking in the Democratic Republic of Congo. During my interactions with the interviewees, they questioned me about my life as they assessed whether to share their hidden narratives, long invisibilised in academic and governmental archives. My positionality granted me access to these women, but it also precipitated expectations to convey their stories responsibly. Hence, I faced these issues through the constant awareness of power relationality. This article advances Makana's "ebb and flow of fieldwork" approach (2018) by introducing an "African feminist ethics of co-creation," a situated framework that focuses on shared authorship and ethical reciprocity as tools for structural redress against colonial and heteropatriarchal silencing.

Keywords: co-creation, the women of Sun City, women peacebuilders, African feminist ethics, oral history, epistemic justice, structural redress

Introduction

What do you do when archives are silent? I was a fresh-out-of-graduate-classes student in 2021 who went into fieldwork to conduct research in the National Archives in Kinshasa, the capital city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). I had all my established plans, which looked perfect on paper but not

in reality. As part of my MA project, I received IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval to conduct my field research. I had printed my questionnaire along with the consent forms, ready to be given to my research participants. However, when I began searching for archival records about Congolese women who participated in the 2002–2003 Inter-Congolese Dialogue (ICD) peace process, I found silence.

This experience was in accord with what I had learnt in my MA feminist classes, in which scholars such as Amina Mama (1996) and Sylvia Tamale (2020) criticised the silencing of women's contributions throughout history, not as accidental but rather as the outcome of multiple systems of oppression. They characterised these silences as anomalies inherited from the colonial and patriarchal erasure of African women's agency and intellectual contribution that disregarded women's knowledge production. Sadly, this is the same form of silence I observed and experienced in Kinshasa.

This situation forced me to change my initial plan. I had to shift my research, not simply in terms of logistical adaptation. I was also forced to rethink what doing research meant ethically in my context. I then found myself in a situation where my personal experience echoed Filomena Steady's (2005) vision of African feminism as a socially grounded and community-based ethics that esteems interconnectedness and collective accountability.

Hence, when I shifted my focus to studying Congolese women's narratives of peacemaking, after not finding any relevant information in the archives, I decided to interview these women. I interviewed 36 women who were involved in the peace negotiations, and although my position as a former staff member of an international organisation gave me access to certain women, it also precipitated expectations from these women that I had to carry their voices with care and responsibility.

My regular visits to the archives and my encounters with the absence of these women's narratives made me realise that a deeper epistemological question needed to be raised: what does it mean to research women's peacemaking in a context where both history and archives are structured by erasure? This question became central to my thinking and prompted me to reflect constantly on how research in the context of absence could be conducted ethically in post-conflict Africa. It further pushed me to reflect on

the shift from relational engagement to what I conceptualise as an African feminist ethics of co-creation. Co-creation differs from participatory or relational approaches in research methods. While these approaches emphasise values such as mutuality during research encounters, co-creation is a situated approach that expands these genealogies by positioning collaboration and the redistribution of authorship and visibility as forms of epistemic justice. I differentiate the process of co-creation from Makana's ebb and flow approach (2018) in three ways. Firstly, co-creation allows a process of structural redress to take place rather than just rhythm. Secondly, it points out shared authorship, and lastly, it requires concrete results such as archives, exhibitions, or memorials. This turns research into a practice of repair.

To illustrate the shift that guided my fieldwork, I briefly outline several moments that influenced the process of co-creation in concrete ways. At first, when I arrived in Kinshasa for fieldwork, I leaned on Selina Makana's idea of an ebb and flow approach, as taught in my feminist class, which is an African feminist ethnographic method built on moving between reflective withdrawal (ebb) and active engagement (flow). However, the reality on the ground made it so that this approach did not fully address the structural silence and authorship inequalities that shaped post-conflict knowledge production. It is from that realisation that I conceptualised what I now call an African feminist ethics of co-creation, a situated framework that transforms relational ethics into structural redress.

I engaged in reflexivity as trust deepened between me as a researcher and the women participants. They invited me to their homes and offices to view documents and records related to their peacemaking efforts that they had kept for years. Later, those numerous interactions deepened my comprehension of their peacemaking activism in relation to the power relations of the time. As our collaboration grew, these exchanges gradually shifted from sharing memories to deciding together how to preserve them. It evolved into collaborative acts to reconstruct memory through digital archives and even the design of a memorial stele, which is now housed at the National Museum of the DRC in Kinshasa.

Over time, I realised that this entire process went beyond the ebb and flow approach to incorporate many central features that made us the co-creators of knowledge, whereby knowledge was built *with* participants, not

about them (Bilgen, Nasir and Schöneberg 2021). We worked as collaborators, each guiding the direction of the research. This meant recognising that this process also required a constant awareness of power relationality as fluid and negotiated between myself and the women.

At the same time, co-creation was defined by everyday social markers that structured our interactions, including gender, age, language, socioeconomic status, and political context, which could be observed during fieldwork. These important elements took on new meaning for me as they promoted a collaborative, iterative, and ethical process anchored in local epistemologies, in which participants are not simply sources of data (Zulu et al. 2025) – they are co-authors of meaning, although I have to say that such co-authors were already present in Makana's approach.

This understanding of participants' roles in research aligns with Sylvia Tamale's claim that African feminist knowledge should reflect local epistemologies and relational ethics and not be imported into research (Tamale 2020). In this regard, co-creation becomes a way of practising ethics by creating knowledge *with* participants rather than *about* them. The women became active agents who shaped the research questions, helped verify findings, and collectively imagined possible outcomes. This was a process that materialised repeatedly during my fieldwork. It was not only an abstract process.

Instances of co-creation also occurred during the multiple focus groups I organised with the participants, during which timelines of their activism in the Sun City (South Africa) peace negotiations were developed. The women actively co-designed the Peace Stele, reclaiming shared authorship as they recovered their neglected stories. All the sessions I organised with them were far from simple consultations; they served as moments of co-creation that yielded tangible results. Such an ethic, I argue, is different from both African ethics and Western feminist research ethics because it is rooted in decolonial and anti-heteropatriarchal principles. It recognises that heteropatriarchy in the African context existed long before colonialism arrived on the continent and instead emphasises how colonial and postcolonial state structures reshaped, institutionalised, and intensified those gendered hierarchies by producing the

existing configurations of heteropatriarchy that the African feminist ethics of co-creation seeks to unsettle.

At the same time, the women's own trajectories revealed the depth and diversity of their political engagement. The Congolese women of Sun City were organisers, negotiators, and community leaders who kept their communities together. I was told by many women, "If you only look at the prominent Sun City peace negotiation of 2002, you will miss important aspects of our activism journey, which started long before," and I listened to them to allow co-creation to happen in those times where women helped me understand and contributed to building the focus of my interviews.

When I heard their testimonies and realised how much of their labour remained invisible in public and academic spaces, I realised that I could not keep using the same approach I was taught. I needed an African feminist ethics of co-creation, one that advances women's voices and confronts the colonial and heteropatriarchal systems that kept those voices out in the first place. As noted by African scholars, this pattern still shapes how knowledge about Africa is produced (Zeleza 1997).

By bringing their voices and viewpoints forward, I wanted my research to interrupt that silence and offer a more complete, grounded story of women's peacemaking in the DRC. The African feminist ethics of co-creation that I propose is far more than a method. It is also a political and ethical stance that seeks to honour women's agency and make sure that African research does not prolong extractive practices. As warned by many African feminist scholars, African research can reproduce the same extractive logic it seeks to critique if it fails to transform the relationship between researcher and community (Mama 1996; Pereira and Tsikata 2021). Hence, the conceptualisation of the African feminist ethics of co-creation not only takes this warning seriously but additionally ensures to reproduce reciprocity, shared visibility, and the redistribution of authorship.

In this article, I revisit the conceptual foundations that guided this research, drawing initially on the ebb and flow approach, African decolonial thought, and relational ethics. I then turn to my field experiences with Congolese women peacebuilders to show how these co-creation approaches manifested themselves in our multiple interactions, together with everyday

factors such as language, age, education, and social position, which also shaped our encounters and the practice of co-creation.

Beyond the Ebb and Flow of Fieldwork: Grounding African Feminist Ethics of Co-Creation

Selina Makana's (2018) ebb and flow of fieldwork approach, conceptualised as a cyclical rhythm of reflective withdrawal and active engagement, enables researchers to be responsive to changing field realities. While I initially built on her foundational rhythm, I argue that Makana's conceptualisation is limited when structural redress and shared authorship are at stake. My conceptualisation of the African feminist ethics of co-creation took shape precisely to respond to that gap in shifting rhythm into redress.

African feminist research ethics are diverse, situated, and the uniqueness of each of their contexts is influenced by daily lived experiences, political histories, and epistemologies across the continent (Tripp and Hughes 2018; Idahosa 2021). Hence, African feminists researching across different African countries do not use the same research methods and ethics, which gives rise to multiple expressions of African feminism (Idahosa 2021; Yacob-Haliso and Falola 2021; Knowles 2024; Tamale 2024). Whereas Tripp and Hughes (2018) and Idahosa (2021) emphasise the plurality of each context, Tamale (2024) encourages further epistemic sovereignty, a move that corresponds with my insistence on structural redress through co-creation.

Taking into account that feminist ethics need to be adaptable, question Western generalisations, and incorporate diverse African contexts, it is important for African feminist ethics, without dismissing the Western feminist values of reciprocity, care, and relational power (Tickner 2014), to place greater attention on community accountability, relationality, and resistance to colonial and patriarchal frameworks (Mama 2011; Omotoso 2018).

African feminist ethics also draws on *Ubuntu* as an indigenous philosophy, which emphasises connections among people and reciprocal responsibility. However, *Ubuntu* has been criticised for reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies (Gouws and van Zyl 2015). Hence, building on calls for African scholars to reclaim epistemic authority (Mama 2007), I argue that feminist

ethics must shift from criticism to reconstruction to create our own frameworks for knowing as Africans. In that regard, the co-creation approach embodies this reconstructive ethos by transforming collaboration into a politics of redress. In line with Nnaemeka's (2004) nego-feminism, co-creation insists that negotiation must result in shared authorship rather than simply mutual understanding.

In practice, African feminist ethics researchers have been involved in decolonial knowledge production. They have done so by rejecting extractive practices and recognising interlocutors not as passive subjects but as active co-creators of knowledge (Dieng 2018; Pereira and Tsikata 2021). This co-creation of knowledge also requires reflective engagement with time, language, and space. In the research, time was not the same for everyone. Time was influenced by how the women's diverse personal, political, and cultural experiences shaped the research and by how they wanted to share their journeys. Hence, recognising and adjusting my time to these realities helped to encourage trust with the Congolese women of Sun City.

My idea of an African feminist ethics of co-creation is built on the spirit of ebb and flow but moves beyond it by centring shared authorship, ethical reciprocity, and structural redress. It emphasises the roles and agency of African women and how they have produced knowledge in this case of women's peacemaking in the DRC.

This approach also echoes those of feminist and decolonial critiques of knowledge production. Scholars such as Sandoval (2000), Smith (2021), and DeRocher (2018) have emphasised the need to resist (neo)colonial power relations in research and to empower Southern and Indigenous researchers to lead inquiries within their own communities. Hence, my approach was firmly inspired by African feminist epistemologies that precede and exceed global frameworks, echoing Parry (2020), Gqola (2002), and Mama's (1996) call for feminist research methods that are collaborative, participatory, and emancipatory, and that theorise outwards from the African continent and not from the West inwards.

In practical terms, co-creation embodies successive actions that we carried out collectively to make meaning of the women's peacemaking journeys. It was a process that helped verify narratives together, co-develop public

archives from their personal ones, and collectively determine how memory is preserved. Co-creation is a framework that honours the realities of African contexts, challenges power imbalances, and promotes research that ethically benefits all involved. In this case, co-creation was formed by the views and experiences of the women who participated in this research.

African Feminist Ethics in the Study of Peace and Security

African feminist ethics takes intersectionality into account when addressing gender issues alongside issues of race, class, and ethnicity (Parry 2020; Omotoso 2018; Wilén 2022; Kezie-Nwoha 2020). In peace and security studies, feminist scholars also pay attention to intersectionality to show how colonial and patriarchal norms determine who is allowed to speak, negotiate, and be remembered. Similarly, power structures have an inherent silencing effect on marginalised groups, or the subaltern, and colonised women experience injustices in relation to dominant Western discourse (Spivak 1988; Crenshaw 1991). In the DRC, these points of intersection shaped which women gained access to the peace tables and whose input was written out of the national record. From this perspective, intersectionality meant analysing how power operates within and across women's movements, and how those interactions shape what becomes apparent or forgotten in the history of peace studies.

African feminist research ethics intersect with peacebuilding by advancing women's participation, resisting stereotypes, and advancing the inclusivity of gendered approaches to peace. But participation on its own, from the perspective of co-creation, is not enough. We had to ensure ethical involvement that goes beyond mere gender representation to pursue shared authorship, inviting the women to co-author a reconstructed institutional memory of peace narratives.

Although African feminist peace scholars do not always explicitly reference the ebb and flow approach, their work does embody most of the principles of non-linearity and contextual adaptation (Makana 2018; Parry 2020). These principles correspond closely with the ethics of co-creation. One scholar, who is also in conversation with Makana's approach to embracing

rhythm as a form of engagement, is Bianca Parry, who emphasises the notion of adaptability in research. But co-creation goes further by translating rhythm into redress and by considering ethical reflection as an act of repair. In the case of the DRC, this was done by creating a collective archive and redistributing authorship.

Analysing women's peace activism through feminist lenses has long revealed categories that cast women as victims, moral guardians, or representatives of the "peaceful feminine" (Wilén 2022; Kezie-Nwoha 2020). African feminist ethics challenges these limiting categories, which restrict the ability of African women peace activists to act as political agents. Instead, it advances an approach that pays close attention to how historical, social, and institutional conditions shape their strategies. This illustrates how these categories have been transformed and how they have allowed the women to define their own positions as strategists, historians, and knowledge-makers, reclaiming the authorship of their past peacemaking work.

In this context, relationality becomes an important element to consider in African feminist peace ethics because it exposes how hegemonic masculinities (Ratele 2014; Adomako Ampofo and Boateng 2007) and hierarchical knowledge systems hinder true collaboration, while proposing alternative forms of relational ethics grounded in care, empathy, and mutual accountability. This relational dimension also informs African feminist understandings of peacebuilding as soft power and ethical practice (Isike 2017).

In post-conflict DRC, this soft power materialised in acts of co-creation, when women collectively reconstructed their archival history, verified each other's testimonies, and designed the Peace Stele. My argument is that these actions we collectively took were not symbolic actions, but intentional ones to repair and reposition these Congolese women's peace stories and legacy in continuity with the documented work done by Mpoumou (2004), Whitman (2006), and Tshite (2024).

African feminist research ethics involves a process of co-creating knowledge grounded in reflection and action. Rather than depending solely on an ethics of care, it advances an ethics of resistance, resisting colonial and heteropatriarchal research practices that have for a long time silenced African

women's intellectual labour. Co-creation incorporates these principles by allowing interlocutors to shape the very architecture of inquiry, making certain that ethical reflection translates into shared ownership of knowledge.

The women I interviewed wanted to be identified in their testimonies. They insisted on being named as a form of epistemic justice. In many of my conversations with them, they refused anonymity, claiming that their names had long been erased and that they wanted it to change.

My position as a Congolese woman with both insider and outsider markers, language, education, and previous professional experiences, required continuous negotiation of trust. I came to realise that each interview became a site of ethical reciprocity where narratives were not extracted but collectively curated. A woman might forget a detail, but because I had already interviewed another woman on the same topic, I would easily make the connection to the current conversation with the new interviewer in front of me. In this sense, co-creation turned oral history into a living archive of resistance and remembrance.

Identity and Positionality in the African Context

In Africa, like elsewhere, positionality is influenced by ethnicity, religion, class, seniority, and social norms, all of which shape how knowledge is produced and received (Ademolu 2023, 347). During my fieldwork, I became aware that my age, accent, and educational background, especially as a Congolese woman studying in the United States (US) on a Fulbright scholarship, affected how I was perceived.

This is because colonial education privileged certain linguistic markers; therefore, my formal French accent led some participants to expect a foreign, even white, researcher. Several women noted that topics related to women's peace activism were rarely studied locally because Congolese historical stories still privilege male, colonial, and nationalist heroes over women's contributions to peacemaking. This view reinforces why it is important to recognise how voice, language, and education mediate inside and outside the dynamics of research in African settings. This experience corresponds with Beoku-Betts' (1994) view that insider status is not always based on racial identity.

At the beginning of one interview, a Congolese woman of Sun City, who is currently a parliamentarian and has held numerous ministerial positions, told me, "I was expecting a white scholar; when we booked this appointment over the phone, your accent sounded white and also many young Congolese women do not come to us with this kind of research." It was the second time I had heard phrases such as, "when we talked over the phone, I thought I was talking to a young white lady." These assumptions were based on how formal my French accent is. Such conversations with the women really reflected how language, class, and expectations intersect in postcolonial research spaces.

I realised that some women had assumed my position as a white person, as they were not envisioning young Congolese women showing an interest in their past peace activism or speaking formally in the colonial language still used throughout the DRC. As a Black African woman who speaks multiple local languages, I have witnessed power relations based on language use and accents. Hence, to avoid creating barriers for my interlocutors, I asked the women I interviewed which language they felt comfortable conversing in. This simple gesture carried an ethical act that directly influenced the trust between us and restored agency to the women in our numerous conversations.

As a young researcher, I was also forced to navigate how hierarchies of age, seniority, and political experience play out in Congolese society. My access to political elites was sometimes facilitated by assumptions about my US educational background and international experience, but I was aware that it could also create distance with women in local movements. In such settings, doing research ethically also meant accepting these tensions and imbalances in a respectful way without assuming that shared national identity or gender automatically produces solidarity (Vlavonou 2023).

This does not mean that local researchers have easy access to political elites for interviews because of a language advantage. As I realised, the women of Sun City came from various backgrounds, ranging from grassroots personnel to privileged elites. Therefore, I had to be reflexive about my positionality, since my Congolese background alone did not guarantee access to my interlocutors.

My previous professional career as a programme officer for an international organisation dedicated to promoting democracy and training

women, or as a consultant working with them, provided familiarity and the opportunity to build relationships with women peacebuilders, but also demanded humility. Consequently, I worked with the interviewees while actively paying close attention to the power relations of that time, reading a lot on the context of the ICD peace process in 2002, and collaborating with them in both conventional and informal ways when I could not find information. But I was also aware that prior connections could have influenced expectations for advocacy or more representation of their past peacebuilding journey.

The feminist ethics of co-creation I experienced on the ground demanded continual reflection on transparency, power relations, and the distinction between collaboration and appropriation. This was in line with Makana's (2018) warning that African feminist scholars must remain aware of how positionality shapes research relationships and refrain from reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to undermine. The women I worked with built a community of pioneer women who have championed peace for over three decades. I followed the warning of Makana to avoid assuming that my "Africanness" would open most doors and make me feel at home, despite being Congolese.

The above issue of shared identity has been raised by Bouka (2015) and Dieng (2018), who have pointed out that having the same race or nationality does not automatically make you an insider or open doors. Instead, it is a process of consistent engagement, humility, and ethical responsiveness that enables the researcher to gain the trust of the research participants and, in the long term, opens doors for the research. As a result, my positionality functioned as a space for negotiation rather than a site of certainty (Nnaemeka 2004). It became a process of learning how proximity and distance exist together in feminist fieldwork.

These relationships became particularly visible when questions of ethnicity and regional identity emerged. I'm from the Kasai, an area historically associated with political opposition. Therefore, I had to be careful not to be categorised as an insider or an outsider in certain situations, as this does not capture the complex and multiple experiences of my own Congolese background. I was aware that my interlocutors could read my presence through those political lines. The Sun City women asked me about my marital status.

They asked about my husband's family name and why I was not carrying his name. They asked about my religion or ethnicity. These questions, while personal, reflected the social codes of Congolese relationality and were part of the ethical exchange that made co-creation possible. I was open about my personal life to build a relationship with my interviewees. However, some questions were asked very directly. One woman asked, "From which tribe is your husband, because a Luba man will not allow his wife to study abroad for so long while leaving her children?" Although questions like this were difficult to answer or seemed harsh, I responded with openness, humour, and care to preserve trust and honour the relational ethics central to African feminist research.

These experiences of being an insider or outsider in a familiar fieldwork setting have been widely investigated (Ademolu 2023; Dieng 2018; Wamai 2014). Ademolu (2023), Dieng (2018), and Wamai (2014) have noted that a researcher may find themselves as an insider in a foreign land or an outsider in their own land (Ergun and Erdemir 2010, 34). These authors elaborate in various ways on how the positions of a researcher's insider/outsider status change depending on their relationship with the person being interviewed. For example, Rama Dieng, while conducting research in Senegal, became aware of "the 'double consciousness' and the 'outsider in me' due to her multiple positionalities" (Dieng 2018, 32), a view different from the claim made by Njoki Wamai, a Kenyan researcher, who felt that she was considered an authentic insider or "one of us," which helped her gain access to information from leaders and individuals at local levels (Wamai 2014, 217).

My experience, much like Dieng's, illustrates that even though I share the same nationality, race, and gender with the women I interviewed, our differences were still significant. They were anchored in ethnic heritage, experiences of violence, levels of activism, and educational backgrounds. I experienced my positionality as fluid and relational. The context and perception of these women continually changed my positionality. Women often asked me about my family, my personal life, my political views, and the reasons behind my research. Although these questions were sometimes difficult, the interactions strengthened our collaboration, and from those shared values of openness and honesty emerged. Our collaboration produced beneficial results, including recognition of their stories by the Ministry of Arts and Culture, as

evidenced by the exhibition of the "Stele of Peace" at the National Museum of the DRC. Similar observations are made by Ademolu (2023), who points out that positionality boundaries are frequently "blurred and vague," and that "insider" status is never fixed (Fayard et al. 2016, 11).

Looking back on these experiences, I came to see my positionality as always in flux, moving between closeness and distance. The women's expectations that I "do something" with their stories demonstrated the political weight of representation and their willingness to document their stories. I kept going back to these women for more information and for clarification. I shared progress with them or simply called them for a collective review of materials. This intentional and ongoing process turned our relationship from one of researchers and participants into one of collaborators, reconstructing a "silenced" history. Over three years of fieldwork, trust grew from these continuous exchanges, and the co-creation process manifested itself in reciprocal engagement. Additionally, I was not only returning regularly to the DRC to maintain the ties I had built with the women over the years, I was doing so in order to reject the extractive logic that privileges one-time data collection, and instead, cultivate sustained relationships that loosen the boundaries between researcher and participants.

In sum, African feminist researchers examine positionality as an ethical practice rooted in relationality and redress that goes beyond mere reflexive exercise. Consequently, positionality requires ongoing negotiation of differences and accountability for those whose stories are represented. Within the African feminist ethics of co-creation, positionality is conceived as an evolving dialogue, like a dynamic process of learning, listening, and transforming relationships into shared acts of knowledge production.

Snowball Sampling, Identity, and Positionality

Often, when I met a Congolese woman of Sun City who agreed to participate in my study, we developed a relationship that led to several other meetings. These women frequently assisted me in accessing their personal archives and introduced me to others for interviews. In some instances, women reached out to me because they knew someone I had previously interviewed. This chain of

relationships illustrates the snowball sampling process I went through during my fieldwork research.

I kept in mind that my interactions with new interlocutors resulted from the trust I had already earned with others, who recommended me to fellow women because they trusted me and my work. My connections did not come from institutional access. They came through these women's networks of solidarity. This relational process took over three years and was central in the practice of an ethics of co-creation, in which research evolved through reciprocal involvement rather than detached observation. In this context, once trust was established, it shaped every subsequent encounter with my interviewees. The confidence participants placed in me by recommending each other and by sharing their personal archives was a form of endorsement that carried ethical responsibility.

I recognise that the term "co-creator" needs critical examination. Although I could easily gain recognition through academic publications, no awards had been given by the government to recognise the contributions of these Congolese women of Sun City at their true value. This reality made me question myself on the meaning of "co-creators," especially if the benefits of this work were unevenly shared. How can shared authorship be practised ethically within systems that continue to privilege researchers over narrators? These questions guided my decisions about acknowledgement, authorship, and visibility.

The epistemological orientation of this research promoted a dialectical interaction between reflexivity and the intersections of religion, gender, class, ethnicity, and nation. From a feminist reflective intersectional standpoint, making sense of these classifications means building equitable "fields" of activity (Bourdieu cited by Wibben et al. 2018). Feminist peace researchers seek to refrain from reproducing hierarchies and power relations in their work. I conducted interviews in Kinshasa and arranged meetings with those in other provinces to catch up with them once they arrived in the capital for various reasons. I asked questions about the strategies they used to enter the peace process. I explored their peacebuilding activities, strategies, experiences of exclusion, and reflections on recognition and legacy. I then analysed the data we co-created using thematic analysis grounded in African feminist views on

ethics. We co-created data through field notes, audio recordings, as well as the personal archival materials shared by the women.

Feminist reflexive and intersectional perspectives shaped my research, helping me to be more cautious about how normative assumptions in research can marginalise "other women," particularly those lacking institutional privilege. Hence, deciding to emphasise their situated voices and differences allowed me to resist the subtle colonising effects that emerge when researchers project their own assumptions or biases as universal truths (Wibben and Donahoe 2019). In this research, my positionality was therefore both epistemological and political. This made me realise that my access to information and my public profile came with an obligation to make sure these women could regain the ownership of their contribution to peace in the DRC. Their insistence that I cite or mention their names and contributions in my research results reinforced the view that ethical research is not merely about avoiding harm but also about actively seeking to achieve justice.

Decentring Research Goals: Implementing Co-creation in the Field

When I began this research, I expected to find participant lists and extensive records of women's peace actions during the ICD (1998–2003), including documentation of 8 March 2002, the day when the women in Sun City took the stage in the negotiation room and performed a theatre protest that revived stalled talks. Unfortunately, records of those scenes could not be found in institutional archives. After two weeks of searching libraries, archives, and foreign ministry repositories, the only documents I found were some newspaper clippings that described the political negotiations of the time. Besides, those newspapers that gave a general understanding of the peace process, these women's specific interventions were omitted. The absence of these archives reflected the larger erasure of women's political agency from the national memory. It became clear that the ebb and flow of fieldwork approach, which had directed my initial reflexivity, was no longer sufficient. I needed to rely on a much larger approach that aimed at repairing what had been historically silenced. I needed to move towards an ethics of co-creation that

could enable me to address these structural absences and to engage the women themselves as keepers and restorers of their own histories.

In other words, engaging in this process of repair through co-creation involved intentional approaches and practices, from which three intertwined contributions emerged. My first observation is that the focus shifted from the rhythm to the structure. This means the research methodology moved from the observation phase to the participation phase. Instead of sticking to a strict plan, I also paid close attention to the questions the participants asked. While listening to the women's stories, they pointed out historical and political issues that limited their ability to contribute to peacemaking in the DRC. This shift in the evolving ethical process reflects our collective effort and desire to design the research and gather the necessary data. Thus, co-creation evolved from a methodological metaphor into a framework for structural reform, in which knowledge production itself became a form of activism. This first element of redistributing authorship and visibility through archival reform transformed women from objects of documentation into co-authors of their collective memory.

I was at first shocked by how little was publicly known about Congolese women's activism before the Sun City negotiations. Most analyses I found, especially in external governmental archives, began directly with the 2002 talks, overlooking the organising and resistance that had begun years earlier. A narrow view of their peace activism journey was perpetuated, prolonging the very silencing my research attempted to challenge. I therefore decentred my initial focus on Sun City to trace the continuum of activism from 1998 onwards, when women mobilised under the *Campagne Nationale pour la Paix (National campaign for peace),* and some were even arrested for demanding the return of peace. In this sense, co-construction involves giving women the opportunity to position themselves as the authentic narrators of their own life stories and, through dialogue and collaborative revision, to assert their right to authorship, rather than allowing others to speak on their behalf.

The second element I observed in the co-creation process demonstrates how a collaborative process leads to concrete results, such as the construction of public archival exhibitions, like the memorial of peace with the women's names on it. Consequently, this collaborative process facilitated the

organisation of three focus groups in May, June, and July 2023. It was in those "safe spaces" that the women collectively reconstructed the memory of their peace activism journey. The first focus group took place at the Congolese National Archives. It was an opportunity for the women to bring their personal documents, photographs, and reports to have them digitised onsite while they retained ownership of the originals. While they were there, all together, we reconstructed timelines, debated on important dates, and corrected any contradictions in their stories.

The second focus group was held at the United Nations (UN) Women's Office in Kinshasa, where the women participants reunited after two decades to co-produce a chronology of their activism and reconnect with those they had not seen for years. The third one, organised at the MONUSCO office (the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC), produced a verified list of 144 women who were involved in the peace negotiations from 1998–2003 (Salama Women's Institute 2022). This list inspired the creation of the Peace Stele, which has been exhibited at the National Museum of the DRC since 30 July 2022. Together with the Congolese Sun City women, we moved the research from mere interpretation of historical fact to the repair and reconstitution of their personal archives into national archives, thereby restoring their presence and authorship in the historical record.

During that public exhibition, other shared results were presented to government representatives and international partners, including over 200 documents from the women's personal collections. These tangible results illustrate the ethical dimension of joint creation. They materialise reciprocity by returning knowledge to the communities that generated it. In these spaces, co-creation is therefore linked to research ethics and political restitution. These acts of restitution turned co-creation from data generation into a feminist practice of material, ethical, and intellectual repair for the harm of past erasure.

The third characteristic observed in the co-creative process was a deep sense of responsibility and reciprocity. Many women requested, "Do something with our stories." To fulfil this request, it was necessary to rethink ethical principles beyond the basic principle of "do no harm" in order to achieve justice. I met with the participants several times to verify data accuracy, exchange drafts, and inform them of the latest developments in archival work.

This ongoing commitment and dedication on the part of the researcher confirmed what most feminist researchers advocate for, which values the research process, reciprocity in the long durée, and ethical accountability by remaining present long after fieldwork formally ends. These engagements embodied accountability and reciprocity central to co-creation.

Decentring my early assumptions also meant relinquishing the idea that the "success" of Sun City should be the central narrative. For the women peacebuilders, activism was a continuum defined by persistence rather than a single event. They referred to their collective effort as *l'esprit de Sun City* (the spirit of Sun City), which transcended political divisions. Listening to them required me to unlearn previous assumptions of the linearity of Congolese peace processes and to recognise their larger strategies of solidarity. Therefore, through co-creation, these women became both participants and historical theorists of peace on their own terms.

In each interview and focus group, I uncovered fragments of a neglected archive, including reports, declarations, attendance lists, and photographs stored in the homes and offices of these women rather than in public repositories. When I cross-checked these documents with press archives and local libraries, collectively, we decided to rebuild a historical timeline that institutional records had obscured. This led me to extend my research timeframe from 1998–2003, not only looking at 2002–2003, to allow the women to share the narratives they have lived and experienced, thereby framing the history of the ICD through their lens. This evolution from data information to collaborative reconstruction embodies the African feminist ethics of co-creation as a living practice that transforms research into a mutual act of remembering and redress.

Ultimately, the various elements discussed are not separate themes but rather conceptual scaffolding that draws attention to the problematisation of the "co" in the co-creation process, intending to transform research into a practice of repair. Altogether, these points demonstrate that it is possible to approach research in a new light by questioning the meaning of the prefix "co" in "co-creation." This required a significant shift, from objectivity to subjectivity, to redefine the very essence of this concept of collaboration. These

changes and transitions necessitated continuous questioning of who benefits, who has a voice, and how recognition was distributed.

Additionally, other factors such as education, political connections, and other relevant aspects highlight the need for sensitivity and adaptability. Some women were hesitant to speak in the presence of their seniors, while others contested my interpretations of certain phases of their activism before 2003. These tensions were not hindrances, but rather essential components of co-creation as an ethical practice. They show that the work of co-creation flourishes on the principles of transparency, humility, and responsiveness, not of control.

Conclusion

This study rethought the ethical, methodological, and epistemological challenges of researching Congolese women's peace activism narratives amid the striking silence of their contributions in national archives and institutions. What began as a search through empty archives at various national institutions evolved into a co-creation of memory with the Congolese women themselves through numerous interviews and focus groups, which facilitated the research process and transformed my fieldwork into a collective historical reconstruction site. This research also highlighted the limitations of existing research ethics, thereby emphasising the necessity of moving beyond rhythm and relationality towards structural redress.

The African feminist ethics of co-creation that emerged from this process expands on Selina Makana's ebb and flow of fieldwork approach (2018) and goes one step further in seeking epistemic justice, continuing the tradition of African feminist scholarship represented by Amina Mama (2011), Obioma Nnaemeka (2004), Sylvia Tamale (2020; 2024), and Filomena Steady (2005), who urged feminist researchers to resist exploitative practices and to position accountability, reciprocity, and respect for local epistemologies at the heart of their research.

Therefore, this engagement, carried out through the research on Congolese women's peace narratives, allowed the co-creation process to emerge through sustained, iterative dialogue with participants. All this was

made possible by the discovery of archival documents from women's personal archives, the shared authorship that resulted from the reconstruction of their narrative of peacemaking activism, and the production of a peace memorial as a tangible result of the co-creation process. These were not symbolic actions. They were actions that carried political meaning, with a deep sense of repair aimed at restoring women's contributions, which had been invisibilised. The outcomes of this co-creation process demonstrate that ethical feminist research in post-conflict contexts must shift beyond mere representation to seeking transformation and epistemic justice across all stages of the research process.

An African feminist ethics of co-creation reframes the researcher's role from that of an observer to a collaborator, from that of a simple interpreter to that of a co-author of memory. It is both a methodology and a political stance, one that recognises African women not as subjects of research but as producers of knowledge.

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Notes

1. Although I was aware of the political silencing of women's work and stories in official archives, as long critiqued by many feminist scholars (see Mama 2011; Smith 2021), I had hoped that the prominence of the ICD peace process and the visibility of some of its female participants in public life would have led to at least some availability of partial documentation. Unfortunately, that was not the case. My academic-related optimism and early-career naivety led me to realise that I had not yet fully grasped the extent to which institutional memory in post-conflict African states frequently excludes women's important political contributions.

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Harnessing Yorùbá Concepts of Care Ìtọ́jú, Ìkẹ́, and Ìgẹ̀ as an Ethics of Holism

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Abstract

Care ethics, or the ethics of care, is a normative ethical theory that emphasises human relationships and understands individuals as interdependent, relational beings. It also highlights the importance of emotion-based virtues, including benevolence, mercy, care, friendship, reconciliation and sensitivity. This paper addresses the problem of care from an African feminist perspective. To address the paucity of African feminist ethical theory, it asks: how do *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́,* and *ìgẹ̀* pan out in various care contexts such as *ikẹ́ ọmọdé* (child care), *ikẹ́ arúgbó* (care for the aged), *ìkẹ́ òbí* (parental care), *ìtọ́jú aláìsàn* (care for the sick), *ìtọ́jú agbèegbè* (environmental care), *ìgẹ̀ ọkọ* (care for the husband), *ìgẹ̀ àgbàlagbà* (care for the elderly), and so forth? *Ìtọ́jú* encompasses simple care or nurture. *Ìkẹ́* represents pampering, indulgence, fussing, and pandering. *Ìgẹ̀* is typically employed in relation to *ìkẹ́,* such as in *ikẹ́ ati ìgẹ̀* (pampering and reverence/showcasing). *Ìgẹ̀,* in addition to indicating pampering, also introduces the element of reverence in care relations. The trio emphasises human relationships and virtues such as care, compassion, and sensitivity, uncovering and recovering African women's contributions to the care discourse and the ethics of holism. Do *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀* contribute to or undermine economic power? This paper uses the philosophical methodology of critical analysis, argumentation, and the reconstruction of ideas to argue that the trio of *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀* provides a holistic conception of care, nurturing, and healthy pampering applicable beyond the African context, as it incorporates not only bodily or physical care but also spiritual, emotional, social and environmental care of humans, fauna, and flora.

Keywords: Feminist care ethics, African feminist ethics, Yorùbá care ethics, Western care ethics, ethics of holism

Introduction

This paper discusses the triad of *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀*. It examines how the trio is implicated in various care situations, and fundamentally, how it transcends care ethics towards an ethics of holism. *Ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀* are African concepts, specifically words from the Yorùbá language, employed to denote different levels of care and caring that apply beyond bodily care to the environment, animals, the economy, and activism. The discourse relates to an African feminism, as *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, *and ìgẹ̀* distil women's contributions to the aforementioned areas using these concepts, thereby validating African women's daily life experiences as significant beyond the domestic sphere. While Western perspectives have predominantly shaped the discourse on care ethics, South African *Ubuntu* ethics has been linked to care ethics (Hall et al. 2013; Nicolaides 2015; Gouws and van Zyl 2015). With this in mind, this paper contributes to the literature by advancing the understanding and incorporation of non-Western, predominantly West African, ethical traditions. It contributes to African feminist ethics on care by exploring the rich culture of care ethics embedded within the Yorùbá belief system, specifically focusing on the concepts of *ìtọ́jú* (careful attention, protection and maintenance), *ìkẹ́* (pampering, intense care, careful handling), and *ìgẹ̀* (reverence, respect, showcase).[1] These concepts offer a varied, yet holistic, approach to care that encompasses physical, emotional, spiritual and environmental dimensions in what could be called a Yorùbá feminist ethics of holism.[2] By examining these concepts, we aim to contribute to the growing body of African feminist ethical theory and broaden the global understanding of care ethics.

Contextualising Yorùbá Care Ethics

The Yorùbá, one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, have developed a sophisticated ethical system that emphasises communal responsibility, intergenerational care, and harmony with the natural world (Oyewale 2020). The concepts of *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀* form a triad that encapsulates the Yorùbá

approach to care in various contexts, from childcare to environmental stewardship. Integrating these concepts into contemporary care practices presents both opportunities and challenges as we navigate the complexities of modern healthcare and social support systems. How can they (*ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀)* be applied to various care situations, including *ìkẹ́ ọmọdé* (childcare), *ìkẹ́ arúgbó* (care for the aged), *ìkẹ́ òbí* (parental care), *ìtọ́jú aláìsàn* (care for the sick), *ìtọ́jú agbèegbè* (environmental care), *ìgẹ̀ ọkọ* (care for the husband), *ìgẹ̀ àgbàlagbà* (care for the elderly), and other care situations? We found some responses to this by exploring how the trio of *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀* provides a comprehensive framework for care applicable beyond bodily care and beyond the African context. In particular, *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀* offer a direct, deeper, and complementary approach to care (*ìtọ́jú).* When taken together, these concepts provide a holistic understanding of care that addresses the multifaceted nature of human needs and experiences. This exploration deepens our knowledge of care ethics from an African perspective, offering valuable insights and a framework for addressing global care challenges in an increasingly interconnected world.

Ìtọ́jú encompasses simple care or nurture, in which one assumes a responsibility similar to that of a professional caregiver. At this level, one can care for anybody. *Ìtọ́jú* is to care at the bare minimum, for instance, *itọ́jú ọmọ* (care for the child), *itọ́jú ayíká* (care for the surroundings), *itọ́jú ẹbí* (care for the family). It implies a proactive approach to care that anticipates needs and takes preventive measures (Oyewale 2020). This concept extends beyond human relationships to include care for the environment and the spiritual well-being of all humans. In practice, *ìtọ́jú* may manifest as regular health check-ups, preventive maintenance of community infrastructure, or the preservation of cultural traditions, among other examples. *Ìtọ́jú* is the Yorùbá equivalent of the common notion of the care we give to people and all other animate and inanimate things. Yorùbá care ethics focuses on caring for people, animals, properties, possessions, and surroundings. Similarly, we strive to maintain a peaceful coexistence with our environment, fostering a happy life while nurturing plants and trees to meet our needs. This expansive nature of *ìtọ́jú* reflects the Yorùbá understanding that care is not limited to interpersonal relationships but extends to all aspects of life and the world around us.

Ìkẹ́ represents pampering, indulgence, fussing, and pandering (Ilori 2025).[3] It goes beyond *ìtọ́jú*, which is the first gradient of caring. It emphasises the ongoing nature of caring relationships. *Ìkẹ́* is when one takes extra care of somebody or something. This may be due to the relationship between the carer and the person receiving care. *Ìkẹ́* refers to a type of care that is more personal and passionate than *ìtọ́jú*. The interests of the cared-for become the primary concern of the carer. For instance, the Yorùbás often express the following statements: *o n kẹ́ bí ojú* (pampering someone like the eyes), *o n kẹ́ nkan ọ̀sìn* (pampering domestic animals), *o n kẹ́ ọmọ* (parental caring for the child), *kẹ́ ọkọ* (affectionate care for the husband), *kẹ́ aya* (affectionate care for the wife), to reflect the importance of *ikẹ́*. *Ìkẹ́* involves sustained effort and dedication in providing support and nourishment, whether in caring for the environment, children, animals, elders, or the community (Togonu-Bickersteth 1997). In contrast to *ìtọ́jú*, describing *ìkẹ́* in concrete actions is often difficult, if not impossible. *Ìkẹ́* is a higher level of *ìtọ́jú*. The Yorùbás believe that parents who give their children *ìkẹ́* when they are young will receive it back as they grow older.[4] This aligns with the common view of life as a cyclical journey, where care given in terms of *ìkẹ́* is eventually reciprocated, creating a sustainable system of mutual support within communities.

Ìkẹ́, in comparison to *ìtọ́jú*, is deeper and deeply personal with more attention to details (Francis Olufemi Oladiipo, personal communication with Olojede, 26 March 2024). *Ìtọ́jú* appears to be superficial where *ìkẹ́* is present. For instance, a nurse can give *ìtọ́jú*, but a mother or relative who doubles as a nurse can transcend mere care, *ìtọ́jú*, to providing *ìkẹ́*. English transliteration fails to convey the notion of *ìké* adequately. There is, however, a negative side to pampering, as seen in a term like *àkẹ́bàjẹ́*; when, for instance, a child or person is over-pampered. In providing *ìkẹ́*, moderation is key. The concept of *ìkẹ́* recognises that care is not a one-time act but a continuous process that requires commitment and perseverance. To care for someone or something under the caption of *ìkẹ́* insinuates a recognition of a more profound sense of caring responsibility. The manifestation of this caring responsibility, as demonstrated in *ìkẹ́*, goes further to project that the individual who cares for another person or group of people or a thing, e.g. one's parents, children, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, acknowledges something in them that

is beyond the ordinary reason for caring for the welfare of people in general. It is safe to say that *ìkẹ́*, as used by the Yorùbás, speaks more to the metaphysical connection in human relationships.

While *ìkẹ́* is used as a stand-alone concept, *ìgẹ̀* is typically employed in relation to *ìkẹ́*, such as in *ìkẹ́ ati ìgẹ̀* (pampering and reverence/showcasing); both usually go together (Francis Olufemi Oladiipo, personal communication with Olojede, 26 March 2024). *Ìgẹ̀* is an extension of *ìkẹ́*. *Ìgẹ̀*, in addition to indicating pampering, also introduces the element of reverence in care relations. While it might seem at odds with the moderation emphasised in Yorùbá ethics (Hamzat and Adeosun 2020), *ìgẹ̀* recognises the importance of dignity, respect for the person, and occasional extravagance in care relationships, acknowledging the emotional and psychological benefits of such gestures. *Ìgẹ̀* also implies *àpọ́nlé*, *àyẹ́sí* (deep respect, courteousness), but is not a direct synonym of these concepts. Following the trajectory of this exposition, *ìgẹ̀* is a third layer and culmination of a caring attitude in the Yorùbá belief system and practice. To reach this level of caring, one must start with *ìtọ́jú*, develop into *ìkẹ́*, and peak at *ìgẹ̀*. No one can ever achieve this level of caring attitude without fulfilling *itọ́jú* and *ìkẹ́* first in the Yorùbá caring practice.

This layer of care (*ìgẹ̀*) often manifests in familial bonds and marital relationships, though it is not limited to these. Parents show this form of care towards their children as they grow; older children exemplify it to their ageing parents; and spouses also demonstrate it in their marital union. This concept adds a layer of warmth, intimacy, and affection to a caring relationship, recognising that sometimes going above and beyond the basic duties of care can have significant positive impacts on well-being. Reaching this stage of care cultivates a form of moral reciprocity, in which both the carer and the cared-for recognise each other as moral agents, bound in a relationship of mutual respect and responsive commitment. This approach is similar to Nel Noddings' claim that "caring is not controlled entirely by the carer – it is a mode of shared control" (2002, 14). Hence, both the carer and the cared-for are actively involved in the care process and activities; both parties contribute appropriately. However, this recognition in Noddings' (2002) care project is at the more general stage of caring, which corresponds to the *ìtọ́jú* stage in Yorùbá caring practice.

These three concepts – *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀* – are not isolated but are connected, forming a comprehensive approach to care that addresses multiple facets of human experience. As embodied by these concepts, the Yorùbá understanding of care recognises the complexity of human needs and the importance of a holistic approach to well-being. This multidimensional view of care aligns with contemporary understandings of health and well-being, which emphasise the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, and social factors (Metz 2013).

We find both similarities and notable differences when comparing Yorùbá care ethics with Western care ethics, as developed by feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (2002, 2013). Both traditions recognise the importance of human connections in ethical decision-making and acknowledge the role of specific situations in moral judgements. They also reject rigid universal principles in favour of more flexible, context-sensitive ethical frameworks. However, there are significant inherent differences between these ethical systems. Yorùbá care ethics incorporates spiritual considerations more explicitly than most Western care ethics frameworks, reflecting the integral role of spirituality in Yorùbá culture. The concept of *ìtọ́jú* extends care to the natural environment, a dimension often less emphasised in Western care ethics. Western ethics gives social significance to the environment, while in the Yorùbá belief system, there is a deeper metaphysical/spiritual connection to the care of the environment. This ecological aspect of Yorùbá ethics aligns with contemporary environmental ethics and could offer valuable insights for addressing global environmental challenges (Bẹwaji 2021).

Furthermore, while Western care ethics tends to focus on individual relationships, Yorùbá ethics emphasises communal responsibilities and collective well-being (Metz 2013). This communal focus reflects the Yorùbá understanding of personhood as inherently relational, where an individual's identity and moral obligations are deeply intertwined with their community. This perspective offers a valuable counterpoint to the often individualistic focus of Western ethical frameworks (Metz 2013). The metaphysical foundations of Yorùbá care ethics also set it apart from Western approaches. Yorùbá ethics is grounded in a specific metaphysical understanding of the universe, including concepts like *orí* (inner head or destiny), which influences ethical considerations (Gbadegesin 1991). *Orí* is more than a physical part of

the body; it is a metaphysical essence that represents an individual's inner self, destiny, and moral compass. Care, or *ìtọ́jú*, in relation to *orí* is not merely an emotional or material obligation but a spiritual alignment with the well-being and destiny (*ayànmọ̀*) of another. To care for someone, therefore, is to recognise and respect the uniqueness of their *orí*. For instance, when someone supports a young person in choosing a life path aligned with their true purpose, the person is said to be nurturing that person's *orí*. This reflects a deep moral responsibility that extends beyond caring for a person's physical needs to encompass their metaphysical journey as well. This metaphysical dimension adds depth to Yorùbá care ethics, linking everyday care practices to broader cosmological understandings.

Feminist Care Ethics: A Historical Insight

Having explored the Yorùbá concepts of *ìkẹ́*, *ìtọ́jú*, and *ìgẹ̀* as expressions of a holistic and relational moral outlook, it is helpful to take an inward turn into broader philosophical discussions of the history of feminist care ethics to juxtapose the uniqueness and universality of Yorùbá care ethics. In normative ethical theories, care ethics emerged as a significant paradigm, emphasising human relationships, empathy, and context-dependent moral reasoning. It challenges traditional ethical frameworks by prioritising the interdependent nature of human existence and the role of emotion-based virtues in moral decision-making (D'olimpio 2019). Care ethics started to gain traction in the late 20th century as a revolutionary approach to moral philosophy.

The development of care ethics is closely tied to feminist thought, with pioneers like Gilligan (1982) challenging prevailing theories of moral development. Noddings (2002, 2013) further developed these ideas, emphasising the relational nature of care and the importance of both the carer and the recipient in ethical interactions. Joan Tronto (1993) expanded the scope of care ethics beyond personal relationships, applying its principles to political theory and social policy. Other significant contributors to care ethics include Eva Feder Kittay (1998), who applied care ethics to the issues of disability and dependency, and Virginia Held (2006), who articulated care ethics as a distinct moral theory. Care ethics is a dominant feminist ethical framework in Western thought.

Care ethics offers a fresh perspective on moral reasoning by emphasising the importance of relationships, context, and emotion in ethical decision-making (Ström-Awn 2020). At its core, it recognises humans as fundamentally interconnected beings rather than isolated individuals. This view is in stark contrast to traditional moral theories like Kantianism and utilitarianism, which prioritise universal principles and rational calculation. Consider, for instance, a family caring for an elderly parent with dementia. Care ethics would prioritise the relational aspects of this situation, such as the family's history, emotional bonds, and the specific needs of both the carer and the cared-for, rather than imposing a universal ethical rule, as seen in both Kantianism and utilitarianism.

Care ethics is defined by five key themes: interdependence, emotional and moral values, relational ties, responsiveness to others, and context-bound considerations (Engster and Hamington 2015). Interdependence is evident in family life, where care ethics views people as reliant on one another, highlighting that individuals depend on others at different life stages (Noda 2011; Collins 2015). This theory suggests that humans thrive in community rather than isolation, an idea exemplified in African traditions. Emotional and moral values such as compassion and empathy are fundamental as care ethics values emotions as vital tools for understanding ethical dilemmas (Held 2006). These values also emphasise the moral significance of familial and friendly relationships. Relational dynamics play a pivotal role in ethical considerations as care theorists argue that human beings are inherently relational. As Fiona Robinson (2011) illustrates, interdependence constitutes a fundamental element of our existence, calling into question the validity of impartial ethical frameworks. Responsiveness to others' needs is another crucial principle. Care ethics prioritises understanding and meeting the expressed needs of those being cared for, with Tronto (1993) asserting that care starts from the needs of others. Lastly, the context-dependent nature of care ethics is significant as it recognises that moral decisions should take specific circumstances and individuals into account (Engster and Hamington 2015). This approach advocates for tailored interventions in humanitarian work rather than generic solutions.

Gilligan (1982) rethinks the traditionally male-centred moral theories of development, aligning them with the feminist agenda of recognising women's

voices across all fields. In *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan (1982) challenges dominant moral theories, critiquing their inadequacies in addressing women's psychological development. She argues that traditional psychological theories – established by Sigmund Freud (1905) and later advanced by Jean Piaget (1932) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1958) – reflect a gender-biased norm that, in her view, "fashions women on a masculine cloth" (Gilligan 1982, 18). In advocating for the "voice of care", Gilligan (1982) introduces a model that captures the moral dimensions of women's psychological development. Her account centres on "voice" – a term she uses to represent feelings, emotions, and "relationship", emphasising care ethics as an alternative to the dominant ethical paradigms. She illustrates how women's self-conception drives a focus on care and responsibility, forming the foundation for an ethics of care as a different moral theory. Gilligan's theory is based on how women perceive themselves. She uses the term "conception" to highlight women's understanding of themselves, emphasising that their judgements are often highly contextual (Gilligan 1977). To illustrate this, she contrasts the moral judgements of two 11-year-olds, one male and one female, confronting a moral dilemma. By analysing their responses, she questions prevailing developmental theories, such as Freud's view of women's moral inferiority and Kohlberg's six-stage model, which have traditionally undervalued relational perspectives (Gilligan 1982).

Most dictionaries characterise "care" as a state of mental engagement or concern, often linked with anxiety, fear, or solicitude regarding someone or something (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Thus, caring typically implies a focused mental state in which an individual feels emotionally invested. Milton Mayeroff describes caring as helping others grow and actualise themselves (Mayeroff 1971, cited by Noddings 2013). Mayeroff's view emphasises a dynamic in which one party aids another in reaching their full potential, thereby concentrating control in the hands of the carer. However, examining care from this angle is somewhat restricted and risks misrepresenting its essence. Thus, there is a necessity for another perspective. Noddings (2002) and Noddings (2013) starts by examining the fundamental nature of care. She acknowledges that defining care is a difficult task. She makes attempts to delineate what care is. For her, care denotes a fondness or regard for a person or object (Noddings 2013). Fundamentally, it involves taking responsibility for another person's or

object's well-being, safety, or maintenance. Hence, caring inherently implies a relational interaction between two individuals: the carer and the one who is cared for. Care becomes sincere when the cared-for expresses a need and the carer consciously acknowledges and responds to it (Noddings 2002). Here, "need" includes material and emotional aspects, such as companionship, respect, privacy, and support (Noddings 2002, 14). In fulfilling these needs, the carer's actions must be qualitative and quantitative. An example from Noddings illustrates this: Mr Smith provides financial support for his mother in a nursing home but fails to visit or communicate with her – his "care" may fulfil the quantitative aspect but lacks qualitative depth (Noddings 2013). True care necessitates both dimensions. Moreover, the cared-for must recognise and accept the carer's efforts. Without this recognition, caring remains superficial and incomplete. This dynamic highlights Noddings' (2013) concept that the care process begins with the cared-for. She observes that "something from the carer must be received, completed in the cared-for" (Noddings 2013, 9). Thus, a genuine caring interaction only occurs if the cared-for acknowledges the carer's concern.

One of the central ideas in Noddings' project is that caring arises from our natural human inclinations, our innate tendency to respond to others with empathy, affection, and attentiveness, and the relational encounters through which these feelings are expressed and deepened. She refers to this as natural caring, motivated by the innate love we have for others, which makes us care for and look after their well-being. In her words, "Such caring may require monumental physical or emotional effort, but it does not require a moral effort; that is, we act out of inclination, not out of duty or concern for the status of our character. Such caring, I argue, is the social condition we treasure and want to establish or preserve" (Noddings 2013, xv). Her emphasis on care as a natural and affective response by the caregiver to the cared-for, rather than a duty-bound obligation, marks a significant departure from traditional ethical frameworks. However, this reliance on natural predispositions raises questions about the universality and consistency of care. Using this principle as the foundation for a comprehensive ethical system becomes challenging if natural caring cannot reliably motivate ethical behaviour.

Furthermore, Noddings' relational model of caring encounters ethical ambiguities when the care recipient fails to reciprocate or even rejects the care

offered. By placing the responsibility on the cared-for individual to acknowledge and validate the care provided, Noddings risks creating undue pressure for them to respond positively, even if they do not feel genuinely cared for. This expectation may unintentionally restrict the autonomy of the cared-for, transforming care into an obligation rather than fostering a mutual engagement. Lastly, while Noddings advocates for an ethics of care as an alternative to masculine, principle-based ethics, her focus on relational closeness and personal engagement may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes about gender roles. By associating care ethics primarily with women's moral experiences, Noddings might limit its appeal and applicability across different genders. Critics, such as Michael Slote (2007) and Onora O'Neill (2012), argue that for care ethics to be universally applicable, it should integrate elements of impartiality and justice, ensuring it can tackle ethical challenges in diverse contexts without reinforcing gendered expectations.

Despite these criticisms, the notion of care from a Western perspective provides a refreshing break from the male-centred ethical theories that have dominated the discourse on moral philosophy for ages. While African feminist ethics can relate to the Western conception of care, the former offers a deeper, more robust layer of care than its Western counterpart, and to this, we now turn. The Yorùbá belief system, deeply rooted in West African culture, offers a rich account of philosophical and ethical concepts that provides valuable insights into care ethics. This complex system of thought developed over centuries presents a holistic worldview that emphasises the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of maintaining harmony within the community and with the spiritual realm (Etta et al. 2016).[5]

Ethics of Holism and African Feminist Care Ethics

African feminist ethics has been the subject of theorising by a number of scholars (Telesia 2024; Fayemi 2009; Mangena 2009). Some of these scholars focus particularly on the idea of care and its implications for women. They argue that, as socially structured, care relations often place a heavy burden on women. Such relations can become a source of oppression, suppression, and subjugation, limiting women's freedom and self-actualisation (Omotoso 2018; Olojede 2020). For this reason, they contend that African feminist ethics should

not be confined to the ethics of care alone. While it is a truism that African feminist ethics should not be based solely on care, the act of caring is an integral part of it. This is because, in the pre-colonial or traditional African setting where women were more burdened with the act of caring, there were women such as Efunsetan Aniwura, Queen Amina of Zazzau, Queen Kambasa, Moremi Ajasoro, Queen Idia of Benin Kingdom, and the Queen Mothers of Ghana, who also had enviable responsibilities that transcended bodily care (Olojede and Nwabueze 2025).[6]

Furthermore, in Yorùbá culture, some aspects suggest a superiority of the female gender, emanating from the art of caring. Legend has it that Olódùmarè sent all the Òrìṣà (gods) into the world with the task to *mú ayé tòrò* (restore peace to the world). They toiled and laboured without success and eventually had to return to Olódùmarè to report their failure. Olódùmarè then inquired about the list of the Òrìṣàs who went on the expedition. After they enumerated the names of all the Òrìṣà that went, Olódùmarè asked why they excluded Ọ̀ṣún.[7] They responded in the common patriarchal derogatory language, *obínrin lásán ni* (she is just an ordinary woman). Olódùmarè instructed the contingent to return to the world, this time with Ọ̀ṣún accompanying them. It was only after this that the mission was successful and the world became peaceful and flourished. Ọ̀ṣún was initially excluded because she was female, but they became successful by including her (Kolade Ajila, personal communication with Olojede, 29 April and 5 June 2025).

In addition, at the beginning of the year, people are greeted thus *ọdún á yabo* (literally, "the year shall be fruitful, productive"). *Abo* here refers to the female or femininity. No one ever says *ọdún á yakọ* ("the year shall be calamitous"); *akọ* here refers to the male or masculinity. Furthermore, when someone wishes to do evil and make another unproductive, they use *akọ ìbẹ́pẹ* (male pawpaw) for an evil charm. When a woman gives birth, and the sex is described as *ọwọ́ ẹ̀rọ̀* (soothing direction), it refers to a girl child. The essence of these illustrations is not to suggest that women are the only carers or that they must lose themselves in the act of caring. It also does not deny the importance of holistic care, which includes active male participation. Instead, the point is that caring is often understood as ontological to women's nature. In Yorùbá culture, there are contexts where preference is shown towards

women because of their fertility and, by extension, their natural capacity for care. This preference is shaped by the belief that what is feminine tends to ease difficulty, foster productivity, and demand less strain.[8] These allusions to the fertility and productivity of women cannot, therefore, be divorced from their roles as carers. These resources in Yorùbá culture provide a model for respecting the caregiving role of women, not necessarily female superiority, but female indispensability.

More importantly, the point being made in these premises is that Yorùbá culture and society do not necessarily expect women to bury themselves in the act of caring. Even in contemporary Yorùbá society, some women, for various reasons, including negative self-image, lack of a supportive partner or social support system, and lack of assertiveness, find themselves being overly tolerant, indulgent, and resilient in their approach to caring. It is not the society that necessarily imposes this onerous burden of caring on women. Instead, some women take it upon themselves and, over time, become unambitious, submerging themselves in the role of caregiver. This point is corroborated by the types of songs women sing to indicate boundary-setting and the need to care for themselves, even as they care for others.

B'éwúrẹ́ lekú ókú
B'éwúrẹ́ lekú ókú
Émi òlè kó'mí éèyán, kí n kó'mí ẹran
B'éwúrẹ́ lekú ókú

If a goat wants to die, let it die

If a goat wants to die, let it die

I cannot pack human faeces and goats' faeces as well (literal translation)

I cannot care for humans and then care for animals (connotative meaning)

If a goat wants to die, please let it die.[9]

From the foregoing, it can be established that care in the Yorùbá worldview is not a singular act of affection or provision, but a layered commitment to the well-being, flourishing, and dignity of others. The concepts of *itọ́jú*, *ikẹ́*, and *igẹ́* serve not merely as isolated moral duties but as

interconnecting practices that define the essence of meaningful human relationships. These ideas are not abstract virtues but practical principles that find expression in everyday contexts such as marriage, finance, activism, friendship, child-parent relations, care of the sick, animal husbandry, and so forth.

The trio of *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀* applies to humans and other things or ideas. For instance, an ailing person (*aláìsàn*) can enjoy the trio of *ìtọ́jú* to *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀*. This is because care for the sick in a typical Yorùbá community is not limited to the body alone; it is holistic, encompassing the body, soul, and spirit. Depending on the circumstances, it may involve a combination of sacrifices, rituals, concoctions, and appeasements to the gods. Caring for the sick is a communal activity. The level of care the native doctor or herbalist usually gives is *ìtọ́jú*, while *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀* involve a deeper level of care, incorporating emotional attachment, passion, and intense love for the ailing person, which can only come from close relatives. When the native doctor has done her part, the relations of the sick person take over, or both parties do their parts concomitantly. This could be the mother, wife or wives, children, siblings, or a complex combination of all these relationships. Hence, an ailing person may enjoy the maximum amount of care that transcends mere *ìtọ́jú* to reach *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀* from his/her relations, family, and friends. It is also possible for an ailing person to be a recipient of only *ìtọ́jú* even from his/her relations, depending on how loved the person is.

Ìtọ́jú, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀* do not just apply to the sick. Given that *ìtọ́jú* is at the most basic level, *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀* apply to many other categories of persons as discussed earlier, including children or children of a certain kind, a newly widowed widow or widower, an important visitor (*àlejò*), a newborn, a mother who has just given birth, etc. Anyone can administer the trio; they can be used for both sexes, across different ages, and in different conditions or situations. It all depends on how, when, and to whom/what we use them. As noted, women usually bear the brunt of care, but that does not mean men cannot show care or the trio. In this context, society expects men to care differently from women; men who care like women are tagged or targeted for sarcasm or bad jokes, while, of course, children are expected to care for their parents as well, especially in their old age, when ill, or as the occasion demands. Everyone

indeed needs the trio at different levels of care depending on the individual's circumstances.

It is important to note that while the three concepts are primarily used in relation to humans, their usage also permeates and applies to non-human elements as well, for instance, the environment (*agbèègbè*) or surroundings (*àyíká)*. In the care for the environment, *ìtọ́jú* is the term that applies the most. So, we talk of *ìtọ́jú* (care) of the environment, and not *ìkẹ́* and/or *ìgẹ̀* of the environment, which sounds odd and out of place in the Yorùbá belief system. It is essential to state that environmental care in Yorùbá parlance is intricately connected to religion and spirituality, expressed through beliefs regarding *èèwò* (taboo), *igbó orò*, *igbó àìwò*, or *igbó àìkò* (groves/forbidden forests), proverbs, myths, etc. (Olojede 2012). Nonetheless, designating such forests in this manner constitutes a deeper form of care, that is, according to *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀*, for certain types of trees or for the forest as a whole. The religious and spiritual connotations attached to such forests serve as a deterrent, discouraging people from indiscriminately entering them. This idea is instrumental to the emergence of government forest reserves (*igbó ọba*) in modern times.

The environment is not an isolated part of a whole in the Yorùbá belief system; rather, it includes humans, animals, plants, and "non-living beings". While animals ordinarily receive *ìtọ́jú* referred to as *ìtọ́jú ohun ọ̀sìn* (care for domestic animals), the duo of *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀* (though ordinarily not applied to animals) can be discerned in the treatment of animals in certain circumstances and in relation to other entities as well.[10] For instance, when an animal is injured, recuperating, pregnant, or nursing a child, its owners tend to pay closer attention to by feeding it more, increasing hygiene in its pen when movement is impaired, assisting it to stand, and caring for its offspring. Some animal owners even keep vigils to offer more personalised care in a way that could be described as *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀* (Falade 2025).[11] In addition, the care animals receive in the zoo can be described as more intensive and personalised than that of their counterparts in the wild. In that sense, we care for them deeply, which is *ìkẹ́*, pampering. The idea of *ìgẹ̀* is evidenced in the fact that we showcase them to the world for the world to see and admire. We can also do similar things to flowers.

Ìtọ́jú covers a wide range of things; it applies to most things, such as *ìtọ́jú ìlú* (care for the town/city); *ìtọ́jú ọrọ́ ajé* (care for the economy) in the sense of making the economy more viable; and *ìtọ́jú erè oko* (keeping farm proceeds safe from rot and theft). One can *tọ́jú owo* (keep or manage money), *tọ́jú ipó* (responsible use of position/office), and *tọ́jú onibara* (good customer service). Further, herbalists or traditional healers, whether women (*ìyáláwo*, *eléwé ọmọ* or *alágbo*) or men (*babaláwo*), place tremendous value on their herbs in ways that transcend mere *ìtọ́jú* (care) to reach *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀*.[12] This also applies to flowers (*òdòdó*) after they are removed from the bush. The processes of nurturing, through regular watering, pruning, weeding, plucking, and, in contemporary times, arranging in a vase and displaying, can all be referred to as *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀* (Femi-Amao 2025).[13]

It is essential to recognise the delicate balance between women's independence and subjugation in the context of the question of whether *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀* undermine or contribute to economic power. Women are economically independent, as they preside over their petty trades and own the proceeds solely, while a few also farm cash crops. Nonetheless, women are subordinated by men because several parts of the social system make men senior and grant them control over women (Zeitlin et al. 1995). Women's unpaid or underpaid care work is a significant issue in the 21st century. Despite this uneven social structure, women tend to extend the trio of *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀* to themselves and their societies in various ways. To shore up their finances by engaging in *àjọ* or *èsúsú* (thrift), the women tend to *tọ́jú owó* (keep or manage money). This may take the form of a daily or weekly monetary contribution, in which one person holds the funds for the group and participants take turns receiving their share, usually determined either by ballots or by prioritising those with the most pressing needs. Such funds are used to purchase more goods for trade, support ceremonies such as burials and weddings, or to assist oneself, others, or family members. In this context, this practice can be described as *ìtọ́jú owó* (the safeguarding of money, whether from theft or for-profit purposes).

Conclusion

This paper explores care from a West African Yorùbá perspective through the trio of *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀*. It thus contributes to African feminist care ethics as the triad stresses humans' relational character and virtues of care, compassion, and sensitivity, recovering both erasure and omission of African women's contributions to the care discourse. *Ìtọ́jú* (care, careful attention, and maintenance), *ìkẹ́* (nurturing and pampering), and *ìgẹ̀* (respect and reverence) go beyond bodily care to encompass care of the environment, animals, finances, activism etc. African feminist ethics of care thus embodies a holistic ethics. The ethics of holism resist fragmenting people from their bodies, their communities, or the earth that sustains them. It yields a more culturally rooted and philosophically expansive ethics. In this framework, caring for another is inseparable from caring for oneself and for the broader ecological context that enables all relationships to exist.

Acknowledging that women have historically borne a disproportionate share of care, this paper argues that the Yorùbá moral landscape resists the sacrificial logic that often shadows caregiving. Proverbs, praise poetry, and the lived examples of historical women leaders insist that a carer's *orí* (destiny) must flourish even while she tends to others. Holistic feminist ethics thus reframes Yorùbá care not as self-erasure but as reciprocal empowerment. With no attempt at strict bifurcation, *ìtọ́jú* pertains to physical well-being, *ìkẹ́* represents a deeper form of *ìọ́jú* that incorporates social well-being and restores emotional vitality, and *ìgẹ̀* inheres in *ìkẹ́*, a safeguarding of the dignity of the cared-for, recognising the importance of respect for the person, occasional extravagance in care relationships, and acknowledging the emotional and psychological benefits of such gestures.

Finally, by extending these norms to non-human creatures and the natural environment, the Yorùbá concept of care exemplifies an ethics of holism, in which care extends beyond the domestic sphere to encompass not only environmental, but political and economic obligations as well. Caring for rivers, soil, and ancestral lands is not ancillary but integral to sustaining the intertwined destinies of present and future generations in the Yorùbá cosmology. In capturing this multi-layered web of attentiveness, nurturance, and reverence, the trio of *ìtọ́jú*, *ìké*, and *ìgè* offers a robust, feminist ethics of

holism, one capable of providing a framework for the mitigation of contemporary crises of social inequality and ecological degradation, which future studies can explore.

Notes

1. We have chosen the three concepts of *ìtọ́jú*, *ìkẹ́*, and *ìgẹ̀* because they have the most direct relation to care. We acknowledge that similar concepts could exist that are more or less secondary and/or derived from these chosen ones. This trio is our choice, as it best fits the goal of our exposition. The English transliterations provided are the closest possible, in our opinion.
2. Ethics of holism is the idea that African feminist ethics transcends bodily care situations to impact various other aspects of society. African feminist ethics of holism recognises women's contributions beyond bodily care.
3. Ilori, Emmanuel. Interview by Helen Títílọlá Olojede. Interview transcript. Department of Linguistics, Foreign and Nigerian Languages, National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja, 15 May 2025.
4. Although *ìkẹ́* is not typically indicated in parental care for children, *ìtọ́jú* is. *Ìkẹ́* in childcare usually comes up in extenuating circumstances such as an ailing child, an orphan, an only child, an only girl or boy, etc. It goes to show how much such a child(ren) is cherished by their parents. While this is so, it is not in all cases that *ìkẹ́* leads to being *àkẹ́bàjẹ́* (spoilt brat).
5. The environment is part of the community among the Yorùbás. In the Yorùbá cosmology, the environment is not considered a passive backdrop to human life but an active, living component of the community. As a result, they see themselves as stewards, not owners, of the environment, which implies they must actively care for it.
6. These were African women who had significant socio-political impact on their society.
7. Ọ̀sún is a Yorùbá Òrìṣà (goddess) associated with femininity, care, love, sexuality, water, and beauty. She is known to grant children to those trying to conceive.

8. Men indeed care. Men care differently from women. The positionality and situatedness of women and men shape how they care differently. The importance of a father figure and presence in both girl and boy children's upbringing cannot be overemphasised.

9. While this, on the face of it, might seem contradictory, negating the care for the animals and the environment, it is not. The song is instead rendered in hyperbole (*asọ̀rọ̀régee*), a figure of speech used in Yorùbá oral literature to create strong emotional impressions; it adds beauty to language. Others in this family are proverbs, idioms, personification, simile, panegyrics, etc. Women were involved in husbandry, with the proceeds being part of their economic empowerment, so the song is not necessarily a lack of care for animals or a wish that their animals indeed die, but a way of declaring women's agency and their capacity to choose. The point being made in the song is that women are not passive observers in the affairs of things; they are assertive, they can choose between competing demands, and they are not expected to lose themselves in the art of caring. The African (Yorùbá) cosmological chart has the Supreme Being (Olódùmarè) at the apex, humans in the penultimate, and other beings, including animals, plants, and cosmic powers, coming last.

10. The Yorùbá concept of the environment is all-encompassing, including humans, animals, plants, and non-living beings. It is, however, arguable that, given the declining environmental condition, we should transcend mere care (*ìtọ́jú*) to a deeper level like *ìkẹ́* and *ìgẹ̀*.

11. Falade, Monisola. Interview by Helen Títílọlá Olojede. Interview transcript. Department of Linguistics, Foreign and Nigerian Languages, National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja, 15 May 2025.

12. Women herbalists (*ìyáláwo*, *eléwé ọmọ*, or *alágbo*) or men (*babaláwo*) tend to care for their herbs in this manner, as some of their herbs are flowers (*òdòdó/ìtànná*), for instance, hibiscus flower (*ìsápá*) or hibiscus leaves (*amúkan*), rosemary flower/spice (*ewé eléwé*) etc. In Yorùbáland, many flowers are herbs and only the "initiates" know their uses. This makes the people cultivate, nurture, and prune these flowers. Further, the value Yorùbás place on flowers is seen in how they liken children to flowers – for instance, *ọmọ l'òdòdó ẹ̀yẹ* (children are beautiful flowers). Beyond

medicinal cultivation, some deliberately nurture flowers to protect the household from snakes and certain ailments.

13. Femi-Amao, Olubunmi. Interview by Helen Títílọlá Olojede. Interview transcript. Department of Linguistics, Foreign and Nigerian Languages, National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja, 15 May 2025.

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Silent Mourning: Re-Interrogating Feminist Ethics of Care and Government's Political Communication during COVID-19 in Nigeria

Bolaji Olaronke Akanni, Rukayat Atinuke Usman and Sharon Adetutu Omotoso

Abstract

Death is an unavoidable component of human life, an ever-present reality that, paradoxically, is increasingly avoided. In circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when governments' political communication regulated mourning processes, women were affected in particular ways because they are typically the carriers and choreographers of funeral rites; during the pandemic, they developed a form of "silent mourning." By interrogating these dynamics, this article contributes to a nuanced understanding of grief, caregiving, and crisis management in the context of public health emergencies. Using methods of critical analysis, as well as deconstructive and reconstructive argumentation, this study seeks philosophically to foreground decolonial remains (surviving Indigenous cultural ways of mourning and caring that women relied on during COVID-19) linked to Western-centric political communication as women navigated mourning practices during the pandemic. We employ an African feminist philosophical lens to interrogate the relevance of feminist ethics of care during this time.

Keywords: African feminist philosophy, COVID-19, decolonisation, political communication, silent mourning

Introduction

Death is an unavoidable aspect of life, and the loss of a loved one can cause profound grief. Accepting help from others during this difficult period and

allowing oneself the necessary space to heal can facilitate a gradual return to regular routines and enhance appreciation for the life we continue to live (Mortazavi et al. 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped not only public health systems around the world but also how cultures navigate death and grief (Buckley et al. 2023; Sola et al. 2023; Vachon et al. 2023). While restrictions on funeral gatherings and limited contact with dying loved ones caused obstacles, they also provided possibilities for exploring new kinds of connection and support. Although traditional group mourning practices were interrupted, the pandemic allowed for creativity in developing new rituals that promote closure and solidarity.

Across Africa and in many ethnic groups in Nigeria, care continues after death with complex rites that represent spiritual, communal, and cultural values (Park 2020). These mourning practices are frequently gendered, with women, particularly mothers, wives, and daughters, bearing primary responsibility for caregiving and ritual performance (Asuquo et al. 2017; Oyeka 2022). These duties are more than just symbolic; they require significant emotional labour, material preparation, and spiritual guardianship. Asuquo and Akpan-Idiok (2021) found that cultural expectations during funerals can cause emotional strain and negative health outcomes for women.

Government-imposed COVID-19 restrictions in Nigeria further complicated this situation. Public health directives, heavily informed by global health discourses from the global north, were often detached from the lived cultural experiences of Nigerians. These "one-size-fits-all" measures failed to accommodate local mourning customs, particularly those involving women's caregiving. Consequently, mourning was both silenced and fragmented, reduced to its most minimal form, with spiritual and emotional needs unaddressed.

Care ethics mostly ignores the complexity of caregiving in African cultures, as demonstrated by the pandemic. Pandemic-related restrictions failed to recognise how economic hardship, cultural restrictions, and spiritual disruptions affected people's ability to care for one another, forcing them to mourn in silence amid increased caregiving demands. In response, they created culturally rooted alternatives, such as one-year memory events and informal

support networks, which aligned closely with the local communal ethos rather than Western ideas of care.

This article presents an African feminist perspective that prioritises cultural uniqueness, lived experiences, and communal ethics over individual moral reasoning and blanket regulatory frameworks. Critics like Oyewùmí (2003) highlight how Eurocentric feminist paradigms misinterpret African women's experiences, while contemporary studies acknowledge the diversity within both "Western" and "African" feminism. Amina Mama (2001) critiques the homogenising tendencies of global north feminisms that often generalise African women's experiences. African feminist philosophy values care, agency, and mourning within kinship networks. This demonstrates how Nigerian women embraced local care ethics during the COVID-19 pandemic, asserting their moral agency despite state-imposed mourning restrictions.

We present the concept of an "African feminist ethics of ambivalence" to explain how selected Ibadan women handled mourning customs amid COVID-19 constraints. The ethics of ambivalence is viewed as a moral framework that enables women to confront contrasting social and cultural expectations, offering a complex substitute for Western care ethics by presenting caregiving as politically positioned and contextually impacted.

The Nigerian Government's Political Communication

The analysis of government political communication during the pandemic seeks to improve our understanding of the government's operations, failings, and efficacy in times of crisis. Clear and concise communication is crucial for societal cohesion, highlighting the importance of an active government and citizen engagement. Political communication involves a three-way relationship between the government, media, and public, focusing on policy dissemination, public responses, and message framing to elicit political reactions (Karam 2018). This process is key to achieving democratic goals.

In a scoping review, Nour and Kisa (2024) analyse the communication methods of political leaders in countries with high COVID-19 infection rates, identifying six key approaches: social media, science-based communication, narrative control, sympathetic messaging, ideological framing, and storytelling.

Although Nigeria was excluded due to its lower infection rate, similarities with Brazil, India, and South Africa, such as weak healthcare systems and questioned government credibility, were noted. The scoping review highlights Nigeria's crisis communication failures, particularly the lack of compassion and context-specific narratives, which may have fuelled citizens' mistrust.

The Nigerian government relied heavily on its communication strategy to enforce health rules and raise awareness during the pandemic. To educate the public about the virus, its symptoms, and precautions, including handwashing and social distancing, the government used radio, television, and social media (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control 2020). Press briefings and communication coordination were handled by the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, which stated that relief supplies would be delivered to vulnerable groups "in the coming weeks." Ojo (2021, 249), however, draws attention to the absence of precise deadlines for delivering promised relief supplies to vulnerable groups.

Following the first COVID-19 case in Nigeria, public health education and risk communication began using traditional and social media platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook, with messages translated into local languages to increase reach (Lawal and Amzat 2020). The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) launched the #TakeResponsibility campaign to emphasise individuals' roles in prevention (NCDC 2020). This prompted the Nigerian government to impose a lockdown from 30 March to 28 April 2020, which included travel restrictions and the closure of marketplaces, places of worship, and schools, leading to mixed compliance (Mbah 2020). Inconsistencies between federal and state responses hampered national coordination. While the NCDC released guidelines, the absence of a coordinated strategy resulted in disjointed health measures. Strict lockdowns in cities like Lagos and Abuja clashed with various state measures, causing confusion. Resource allocation was uneven, favouring urban areas while leaving rural regions with low supplies (Ilesanmi et al. 2021). This situation exposed flaws in health infrastructure and governance, undermining public trust and emphasising structural inequities. Furthermore, political corruption and misinformation made compliance difficult, as some religious leaders framed the virus in spiritual terms.

Scholars have long criticised Western-centric viewpoints as dominant in African political communication studies (Omotoso 2013; Wasserman 2010; Olukotun and Omotoso 2017; Onuora 2021; Karam 2018; Ngomba 2012; Marie 2018). This criticism emphasises the need for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to political communication that includes African viewpoints, cultural frameworks, and localised interpretations. Such an approach would decrease communication barriers and ensure that African realities are accurately reported and analysed.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, narrative methodology to explore grief and mourning dynamics under COVID-19 restrictions, focusing on women in Ibadan, Nigeria. It forms part of a broader research project examining how grief and widowhood are shaped by cultural change, governance responses, and technological affordances. This specific inquiry situates personal mourning within feminist ethics of care and the disrupted communication structures imposed by governments during the pandemic.

We selected three women involved in mourning traditions in Ibadan and, after COVID-19, used snowball sampling, beginning with "Participant 0," who cared for her husband until he died from the virus. We expanded our search by consulting a major hospital's health information department and reaching out to local clergy from churches and mosques for help with funeral and bereavement information. We acknowledge that this approach may have excluded non-religious individuals, and to some extent, adherents of traditional religions. Strict adherents of traditional religions may have been unintentionally omitted due to difficulties in finding them. However, there is an overlooked level of syncretism of faiths among persons from South-West Nigeria (Peel 1968; Adedokun and Mheta 2025). Thus, many individuals observe "orthodox" requirements from Christianity or Islam while also accommodating socio-cultural rituals depending on their circumstances. Besides, cultures across many African contexts are deeply intertwined with social activities, regardless of religious creed. To address this gap, we further relied on Participant 0's network, including those encountered at the morgue. In total, 11 participants aged 38 to 63 were interviewed. The settings in which

data was collected were marked by limited physical contact and an increased reliance on virtual communication, which may reflect a broader social shift in Ibadan towards the use of digital technologies for care and mourning practices. This shift likely influenced the continued adoption of technological platforms such as Zoom for funerals and memorial gatherings, as well as the continued absence of key family members from some social events, even after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. Ibadan was chosen for its blend of urban and peri-urban features, its major tertiary hospital, the University College Hospital, and rich cultural heritage. Although diverse, the population is predominantly Yoruba, and the Yoruba language plays a key role in communicating cultural norms and social duties. The mourning culture studied is significantly influenced by Yoruba cosmology, familial structure, and communal rituals, despite the presence of non-Yoruba speakers in the city.

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews capturing personal narratives of loss, alongside the tension between private grief and public restrictions on mourning rituals. Questions ranged from how participants felt when their loved one passed to how these feelings evolved upon realising the changes that pandemic protocols would cause to their mourning experiences. Secondary data, such as government papers, newspaper articles, and books, helped us contextualise these experiences within larger socio-political discourses. Thematic analysis revealed key patterns, including the psychological toll of constrained mourning and the creative coping strategies employed by participants. Cross-referencing with secondary sources helped ensure reliability and depth.

Ethical considerations were central to this research. Informed consent was obtained, and identities were anonymised. Participants often felt emotional pain recalling their losses but viewed the interviews as cathartic. Interviews were paused or rescheduled to prioritise their emotional wellbeing and took place in culturally sensitive settings.

This study highlights the complex interplay of grief, cultural practice, and state-imposed limitations in times of global crisis, offering insight into how women navigate mourning amid public health emergencies and disrupted care traditions.

Table 1: Demographic features of women interviewed in Ibadan, 2025

Participant	Gender	Age	Religion	State of origin	Relationship with the deceased	Marital status	Educational level
1	Female	50	Christianity	Oyo	Daughter	Married	Bachelor's degree
2	Female	42	Islam	Oyo	Daughter	Married	HND
3	Female	38	Islam	Ondo	Daughter	Single	BSc
4	Female	59	Christianity	Oyo	Wife	Widowed	BSc
5	Female	60	Islam	Oyo	Sister	Married	BSc
6	Female	48	Christianity	Oyo	Daughter-in-law	Married	SSCE
7	Female	63	Christianity	Oyo	Wife	Widowed	BSc
8	Female	44	Christianity	Osun	Wife	Widowed	OND
9	Female	39	Christianity	Oyo	Daughter	Single	Masters
10	Female	55	Christianity	Osun	Sister	Married	SSCE
11	Female	57	Christianity	Oyo	Wife	Widowed	Masters

Re-interrogating Feminist Ethics of Care during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

This article examines COVID-19-related silent mourning through the lens of feminist ethics of care in Nigeria. The ethics of care underscores the importance of caregiving and interdependence as foundations of ethical behaviour (Gilligan 1977). Relevant in crises, this approach promotes empathy and responsiveness, distinguishing between natural care (intuitive and relationship-based) and ethical care (commitment to societal needs) (Flinders 2001; Noddings 2002). Carol Gilligan (1977) highlights caregiving as a vital communal virtue, critiquing the focus on justice in patriarchal contexts. Nel Noddings (1992, 2010) adds that being cared for strengthens one's ability to care. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, exposed the limitations of relying solely on natural care. By natural care, we mean the everyday care that people provide to others just because they care about them, not because they are paid or trained to do so.

As more family members stayed home, women took on additional responsibilities like cooking, childcare, and home-schooling. Lockdown restrictions further cut off access to essential services such as healthcare, childcare, and transportation, exacerbating their challenges (Kinoti and Kelleher 2022). Female healthcare workers and social workers, often overworked and under-resourced, faced mental and physical exhaustion (Asuquo et al. 2017; Schnall et al. 2008). These conditions highlight a recurring flaw in care ethics: the expectation that women continue to provide care under crisis without structural support, reinforcing gendered inequality (Zarit 2008) and detrimental agency (Omotoso and Kolawole 2025).

African feminist philosophers have highlighted concerns regarding the applicability of Western-centric feminist ethics of care in African contexts. Mangena (2009) warns that adopting care ethics without critique could perpetuate conventional gender roles and ignore the problems encountered by African women, as demonstrated by the risks women in Zimbabwe incur to care for HIV-infected spouses. Omotoso (2018) proposes ethics of vigour as an alternative, which integrates care with justice, risk, and control, going beyond Welch's (1990) ethic of risk, which she critiques as insufficiently result-oriented. Similarly, Olojede (2021) advocates for an ethics rooted in African ontologies, arguing that endogenous experiences, not Eurocentric traditions, should guide feminist ethical frameworks.

This study looks at sorrow and mourning among women in Ibadan, Nigeria, during the COVID-19 lockdown. Interviews with widows and bereaved women revealed that silent mourning policies increased emotional burdens. Instead of alleviating care responsibilities, funeral restrictions raised psychological strain, forcing women to mourn alone without the opportunity to express their grief communally. Mortazavi et al. (2023) affirm that mourning rituals provide vital psychological relief and social support, and their absence exacerbates grief, particularly for women who often play central roles in mourning rites.

Traditional Mourning Practices: Navigating Tradition and Urban Adaptation in Ibadan

Ibadan, a famous Yoruba city in Nigeria, provides an excellent framework for studying mourning traditions. Traditional practices are preserved, including the roles of *ọpó* (widow), *obìnrin ilé* (women carers), and *omo olókù* (bereaved children). However, urban pressures are changing traditional customs, resulting in shorter observances of occasions like multi-day wakes and communal feasting. Death rituals are important social strategies for dealing with loss, with mourning being a culturally learnt process (Mortazavi et al. 2023). Yoruba mourning is gendered, with women frequently serving as carers and memory keepers, transforming personal grief into community resilience.

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic imposed speedy burials, limited gatherings, and excluded family members from hospitals and mortuaries. Widows described experiencing "invisible deaths" where they never saw the body, never held a ceremony, and never received communal validation for their grief. According to Haowei et al. (2022), such disruptions deepen widowhood trauma, especially when paired with economic precarity and social isolation.

Our interviews indicated a mismatch between public health policies and local mourning customs during COVID-19. Government messages often overlooked the cultural roles of women in Yoruba rituals. Broad regulations disrupted these practices, leading to increased trauma for grieving families. Women, typically responsible for post-death care, felt isolated from community support. In response, many organised micro-wakes, digital prayer circles, and surrogate care communities, finding ways to cope with respected health guidelines while honouring their cultural values. This moment called for the enactment of *Ubuntu*, a philosophy emphasising interdependence and restorative care for marginalised individuals. As Diouf et al. (2023) suggest, *Ubuntu* should be intentionally practised to create spaces where art, practice, and scholarship intersect. These grassroots innovations in mourning illustrate that care is evolving and rooted in empathy, resistance, and cultural continuity.

The failure of political communication during the pandemic was both administrative and ethical. By ignoring gendered and cultural aspects of sorrow, pandemic governance excluded mourning care work from public discussion.

An African-specific care ethic should explore how political processes affirm or negate culturally rooted expressions of mourning.

What emerged from the study is a concept we term "African feminist ethics of ambivalence." This framework recognises the complexities of caregiving in African societies where women are praised for their emotional strength but left unsupported, where cultural rituals offer to heal but are also sites of gendered labour, and where state policies often collide with Indigenous practices. Ambivalence here signals the tension between the necessity and the burden of care, especially during crises like COVID-19. The ethics of ambivalence emphasises the value of complexity; rather than seeking simple solutions, it acknowledges the tensions and resilience inherent in women's caregiving during crisis. This approach conceptualises care as inextricably linked to kinship networks and communal identity, offering insights into how care may both restore and adapt in the face of upheaval. As Dillard and Okpalaoka (2011) point out, the concept of wholeness is central to the African understanding of community and caring.

This ethical perspective critiques Western-centric feminist care ethics in addressing the complexities of caregiving for African women after a death. These women provide emotional, spiritual, and practical care without institutional support while navigating societal expectations. The pandemic highlighted that mourning is not only an emotional task but also a political and cultural activity that needs recognition and support in policymaking.

The Nigerian government overlooked mourning rituals as essential cultural and emotional practices, revealing a broader trend in postcolonial administration that often regards care as a private, apolitical matter. This oversight demonstrates the state's technocratic approach, which prioritises biological and security logics over societal concerns (Vachon et al. 2023). By ignoring communal mourning customs rooted in Yoruba cosmology and gender roles, the state diminishes the emotional components of loss and exacerbates structural violence against women who bear caregiving responsibilities. According to Buckley et al. (2023) and Sola et al. (2023), this disrespect reflects the disconnect between public health policy and lived realities, where cultural care infrastructures provide critical emotional support and social resilience.

Post-death Care, Agony, and Nigerian Women: Silent Mourning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

How did the pandemic reconfigure normative feminist ethics of care, and what critical discourses emerged from Nigeria's intersection of bereavement, pandemic, and government policies? This section explores these questions with empirical evidence from the narratives of women. Using these narratives, we explore the tension between traditional mourning practices, cultural expectations, and government-mandated protocols designed to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Silent mourning

The concept of silent mourning is introduced to capture the layered experiences of women navigating grief under the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally, mourning practices in Nigeria are deeply communal, involving physical presence, collective rituals, and emotional support for the bereaved. Pre-pandemic mourning cultures included visits to grieving families, wake-keeping ceremonies, elaborate burial rites, and religious prayers such as the eighth- and 40th-day *Fidau* (for Muslims), as well as widowhood rites and post-death rituals observed across various ethnic groups. These activities are largely facilitated by women, underscoring their vital role in offering care, not only to the deceased but also to the living, thus bridging the gap between cultural obligations and emotional healing (Odimmegwa 2010; Nweke 2021).

In many Nigerian communities, especially in the South-West, women play key roles during mourning. The eldest daughter often leads burial rites after her father's death. There are also wake-keeping and widowhood customs. For instance, the deceased are not forgotten or abandoned when guests are fed, libations are poured, and praise poems (*oríkì*) are sung. These examples of communal care for the deceased highlight how women strengthen family and community ties during loss. These tasks are seen as acts of care that honour the deceased and help the grieving find closure.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these long-standing practices. Restrictions on gatherings, physical distancing, and fears of contagion led to the suspension or significant alteration of traditional rituals

(Omonisi 2020). Women, who typically provided both emotional and logistical support during mourning, found their caregiving roles constrained. This gave rise to what the authors conceptualise as silent mourning, the suppression of public expressions of grief and the erasure of cultural rituals that ordinarily facilitate healing and closure. Ibukun, a participant from the broader study, expressed:

> I could not carry out any service of songs, wake-keep or burial service in our church due to the lockdown measures and social distancing… It was a quiet mourning. Neighbours could not come around.[1]

As a global crisis, the pandemic significantly increased death rates, with over four million deaths recorded worldwide by July 2020 (World Health Organisation 2020). This unprecedented loss triggered widespread grief, yet public health protocols often left mourners isolated. Social distancing deprived individuals of the comfort of physical touch, communal prayers, and traditional gatherings, resulting in what scholars describe as "unfinished" or "disenfranchised grief," a form of sorrow that is not publicly acknowledged, socially supported, or ritually resolved (Doka 1999, 37).

Grief can have serious effects, especially when people lack support during mourning. Women, who often hold families together emotionally, may feel isolated. This can lead to complicated grief, a condition characterised by strong sadness that disrupts social and work life. Recognised in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed, as a mental health issue, complicated grief can increase the risk of trauma, depression, and suicide if unresolved (Nakajima 2018; Mortazavi et al. 2023). Many women used prayer to cope during this time, but six out of 11 felt silenced in their grief because they could not pray for the dead. This shows that prayers for the dead are meant to be communal and carry more weight when many people participate.

This circumstance appeared even more distressing among the Muslim participants, as time was of great essence in performing burial rites (such as burial within 24 hours of death). Mariam, whose family is Muslim, expressed the incompleteness of their grief:

> NASFAT (a popular Muslim social organisation in Nigeria) tried to be there for me during this time. But we couldn't mourn my father according to Islamic laws. You know, we pray together as Muslims, so this social isolation thing was a problem.[2]

Though her parent died at home, many rites such as joint prayers and body washing were skipped to finish the burial before any health authority found out. For her, "It is better to rush everything and put the body in the ground than for the body to be seized."[3] Some Muslims also shared instances of praying over the pictures of the deceased over the phone, and this was unlike the community usually created to support grieving families.

Thus, silent mourning not only reflects the pandemic-induced disruption of cultural and emotional expressions of grief but also reveals the broader implications of crisis-driven public policy. It calls attention to the need for health responses that are both epidemiologically sound and culturally sensitive, strategies that preserve human dignity, honour the dead, and support the mental wellbeing of those left behind.

Devastation caused by policies, bureaucratic hurdles and restrictions

Omonisi (2020) noted that cemeteries limited attendance to fewer than 20 people, enforcing strict social distancing. The ban on international flights further complicated traditional burial rites for those who lost loved ones abroad, and vice-versa. These restrictions disrupted crucial social support systems for emotional healing (Khosa-Nkatini and White 2021). Families turned to virtual funerals and online rituals for connection, although these lacked the intimacy of in-person ceremonies (Selman et al. 2020). Meanwhile, the affluent political class appeared to evade these protocols, deepening socioeconomic divides in mourning practices.

In particular, the contradiction between the government's regulations and the practices among those in government led to conflicting perceptions of the disease's severity for the living, and undermined the imperative to follow burial directives issued by those who appeared to be making the law while simultaneously disregarding it (Mostafa and Hussain 2021). For example, some participants recounted incidents where government officials or politicians would attend funerals in large gatherings, flouting the very restrictions they had

imposed on the populace. A case in point was the burial of Abba Kyari (Chief of Staff to the President of Nigeria, 2015–2020) who died of COVID-19 and whose funeral was attended by a large crowd of government officials, in flagrant violation of social distancing mandates and regulations governing interment. Iyabo, a 42-year-old entrepreneur, who lost her mother, found it particularly hurtful. Her business required frequent trips to markets in Lagos for resale in Ibadan; the lockdown caught her in Lagos. She recounted:

> It [COVID-19 restrictions] affected us because we were supposed to start frying *akara* for people who come to mourn with us and offer prayers for the dead, but the lockdown couldn't allow us [to] do this… I was not happy.[4]

The gap between government statements and reality, along with a lack of trust in the state in Nigeria, caused people to view COVID-19 rules as politically motivated rather than focused on public health. Many believed the virus mainly affected the wealthy, leaving the poor less vulnerable. Conflicting messages changed attitudes towards pandemic guidelines. Some women felt resentful and helpless in their grief, while others adapted traditional mourning practices to challenge the rules.

For instance, Yemi, a 44-year-old widow, discussed the bureaucratic difficulties she faced in securing permission to hold a proper burial for her late husband. Yemi narrated the painful experience of having to transport her husband's body in a private car, with only a few family members in attendance, due to restrictions on public gatherings:

> When my husband died, representatives of the hospital management told us that we couldn't do our normal burial because of COVID-19. We had to sneak his body out at night and bury him quickly with just a few people there. It was so painful, not being able to give him the kind of send-off he deserved.[5]

While interrogating the reasons for the pain and injustice that she felt, Yemi recounted the cultural significance of burial rites in Yoruba tradition, she herself being Yoruba, where the presence of extended family and community members is crucial to the grieving process.

> Losing my husband was devastating. What made it even harder was the pandemic. It left me feeling dejected and lonely because many of my friends and family members, especially those very fond of me, couldn't come around to sympathise with me. Only a few people managed to visit. The pandemic changed everything. My husband was buried immediately and quietly. If not for the

> pandemic, he would have had a more befitting burial – something much more elaborate and deserving of him. The restrictions greatly impacted our traditional burial rites.[6]

In another interview, Funmi, a 39-year-old who lost her father to COVID-19, narrated her experience of separation from her father before he passed on, and the inability to have a proper burial:

> We were not allowed to enter his room. We could only talk to him from a distant window… After four days when he died, the hospital handled everything. We were not permitted to touch his body or to mourn him well. We just did straight burial… straight to the burial ground because we had to follow the [government's] instructions.[7]

Reflecting on injustice, Funmi expressed how she had really wanted to give her father a proper and befitting burial but did not have that opportunity. Funmi, who lived in the suburbs of Agbowo in one of the traditional houses, belonged to the lower middle class. She said, "…and that is why I feel cheated. It was like this rich people's disease took my father."[8] She took a long pause, an interlude that seemed like she was replaying the event on a screen visible only to her, then added that it was an experience she would never wish for her worst enemy, and that it still haunts her.

There are different ways of making sense of "the cheating" in these women's narratives. First, it appeared that while the infirmity of the rich had taken away Funmi's father, it failed to bestow the corresponding privileges of the rich on them – a power to have done the burial as they would have preferred, just as they had watched the rich and powerful do on television. This unravels the class stratification of death and post-death care, cloaked in the pandemic regulations, and the attendant social injustice. Second, the phrase "…but we had to do what they said at the hospital" suggests a lack of agency and the inability of the women to assert their cultural imperatives and preferences over the imposition of pandemic protocols. The ambiguity surrounding the rules for burial rites during the pandemic led many bereaved individuals to follow them without government oversight. Medical practitioners, viewed as essential workers, may have encouraged compliance over defiance among the grieving (Gamad et al. 2022). This obedience was not merely a concession to authority but a means of self-preservation. The fear of a novel disease that claimed thousands of lives daily took precedence over

traditional burial customs. In Nigeria, the stark daily death toll, often shared through digital media and WhatsApp updates, made this fear even more tangible.

Consequently, the experiences of loss and constricted expression of grief and mourning resulted in heightened emotional distress, a diminished sense of meaning and belonging, and disruption of crucial cultural and social practices. However, full solace for this suppressed grief came a year after the lifting of the lockdown, performed by throwing a big party usually tagged "one-year remembrance party" to celebrate the life of the deceased and finally provide closure for the grief of the bereaved.

"We threw the party one year later": suspended mourning and postponed collective catharsis

In Nigeria, burial rites are deeply rooted in spiritual beliefs about the afterlife and the role of ancestors. Traditionally, funerals, especially for the elderly, are elaborate, celebratory events that honour a life well lived and aid the deceased's transition to the ancestral realm (Khosa-Nkatini and White 2021; Ekore and Abass 2016). COVID-19 restrictions disrupted these rituals, denying the bereaved the communal grieving essential for emotional healing. In response, many, like Funmi and Tomi, turned to "one-year remembrance parties" as alternative mourning spaces. These gatherings allowed families to mourn, celebrate, and share stories of loved ones, particularly those who had lived to old age, restoring a sense of closure and community that had been absent during the initial burial (Boge 2023; Adesoji et al. 2021). The remembrance party thus emerged as a critical site for deferred mourning, offering emotional relief and collective healing in the wake of disrupted cultural and spiritual grieving practices. According to Funmi:

> …you know, when your parents die at a ripe old age, there is a special way to go about their burial in our custom. Because of COVID-19, we couldn't do it. But we threw a big celebration one year after.[9]

The two participants (Funmi and Tomi) who lost relations who were considered to have lived to a ripe old age reported attempting to recreate these mourning rituals, albeit on an altered but larger scale, later in time. It appeared that the dead could not rest, or the bereaved could not unburden their grief,

until they held collective ceremonies in commemoration of the departed (Amadi and Igoniko 2024). What was unclear, however, was the extent to which these memorials were socioeconomic events or traditional rites. While Tomi reported that "many prayers were offered for the dead, both traditionally and in church,"[10] Funmi reflected on the economic burden of the event. From Tomi's reflections, it appeared that there was a quagmire in the order of performance of traditional rituals for the dead. Customarily, as the first-born daughter of an elderly person, she was expected to take on an important role:

> In my village [Ondo State, an Eastern Yoruba land], there are specific roles for family members during burial ceremonies, especially the first daughters. Each first daughter is required to bring a live goat, which is used for prayers to ensure my late father's peaceful rest as he journeys to the other world. After the prayers, the goat is slaughtered and prepared as a delicious meal for relatives gathered for the ceremony.[11]

Doing this one year after the death of her father allowed Tomi to fulfil the delayed traditional obligations, perform funeral rites, and mourn collectively with her community. Although Tomi is Yoruba and a non-indigene of Ibadan, her dwelling in Ibadan with the deceased at the time of his death meant that her father's body could not be carried back "home," as was customary among her people. This provided obviously excusable reasons for her inability to carry out his funeral rites. But the consequences of breaking the tradition, which prescribed a fixed timeframe for these rituals, remained unknown. Tomi instead expressed her concerns about the ancestors:

> The COVID-19, which stopped me from executing these rites, was beyond my hands. Where would I have gone to buy a goat? *Ori oku ri mi* (the soul/spirit of the dead can bear witness). I would have done much better if there was a way.[12]

While Tomi bemoaned her inability to perform the prescribed rites, Funmi reflected on how these rites would have cost her financially, emotionally, and health-wise. She thus expressed relief, saying, "I did not bear any of that women stress; I am very grateful for that."[13]

Ibadan funerals are typically elaborate, communal events requiring significant resources (Omonisi 2020). Women, especially the *obìnrin ilé* (married women in the family), play central roles in posthumous care, organising rites, providing emotional support, and cooking for mourners, which can be physically and emotionally taxing (Boge 2023). COVID-19

restrictions changed how people mourned. Funmi, who is not from Ibadan, faced challenges during the lockdown. Her family could not visit, and she could not go home. As a result, she relied on her "Ibadan family," including close neighbours and friends, for support. This shift highlighted new caregiving roles, with emotional and practical tasks falling mainly on women. The pandemic altered how care and grief were managed in local communities. For example, Funmi and Tomi discussed how COVID-19 protocols improved their funeral experiences. Funmi, the widow, appreciated being able to skip some customs, which eased her grief. Tomi felt relieved that she didn't have to bear the costs of hosting friends and relatives after her father's death.

These experiences illustrate the remarkable resilience of Nigerian women and underscore the role of feminist ethics of care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such adaptations reveal the capacity of communities to balance cultural heritage with contemporary challenges.

Conclusion

This article investigates the interaction among women's silent grieving, feminist ethics of care, and Nigerian government's political communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Government communication initiatives attempted to increase trust and reduce disinformation (Ezeibe et al. 2020); however, uneven messaging caused uncertainty and differing interpretations (Aiyewumi and Okeke 2020). Migration limitations, although rooted in safety concerns, alienated communities during the pandemic (Abulude and Abulude 2020). This highlights the need for communication that reflects cultural values, provides accessible means, and incorporates community input.

This article suggests an African feminist ethics of ambivalence that values adaptability, structural responsiveness, and cultural roots. This strategy enables women to negotiate care in ways that are appropriate to their situations, such as balancing moderation with elaborate post-death rites based on Yoruba cosmology. This ethic serves as a useful framework for comprehending care and grief amid crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The ethics of ambivalence explains African women's lived experiences as they navigate the complex pressures of tradition, state regulation, and spiritual duty.

From data collected, the study indicates extraordinary adaptation in grieving customs during the pandemic. Micro-wakes, internet prayer circles, and livestreamed funerals were among the inventive ways in which women honoured their loved ones. These examples demonstrate a caring ethic that is not just deeply founded in cultural traditions, but also sensitive and adaptable to crisis-related issues.

Thus, this article contributes significantly to a larger epistemic enterprise by emphasising African women's experiences as rich sources of theory, resistance, and transformational care. This transformative care explains how African women, especially in Yoruba communities, reinterpret caregiving and grief during times of crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic. Women reinterpreted care through inventive, relational, and flexible practices that addressed both societal demands and state constraints rather than seeing care as a fixed, traditional responsibility associated with ritual performance. In spite of their physical separation, women managed to preserve emotional ties using internet platforms, group storytelling, and symbolic acts of memory. By altering social relationships, moral standards, and epistemic authority, such practices show that care is not only restorative but also transformative. By emphasising these lived experiences, the article positions African women as essential agents who create new ethical frameworks for understanding care in times of disruption and transition, rather than as passive cultural bearers.

We recommend a review of health policies during crisis. Information dissemination should be culturally sensitive and aware of gender issues. Public health strategies need to recognise care practices not merely as private, sentimental gestures, but as public, ethical responsibilities connected to justice and dignity. Political decisions regarding mourning should be guided by local knowledge, respect for religious diversity, and the realities of gender. This could have meant designing mourning policies that permitted culturally sensitive, modest burial rituals that recognised local religious customs and gender roles. Finally, this study advances decolonial discourse by advocating for a contextually grounded feminist care ethics, African feminist ethics of ambivalence, that integrates cultural practices, systemic equity, and policy adaptability, ensuring care does not perpetuate gendered marginalisation.

Notes

1. Ibukun (Participant 1), in-depth interview with first author, Ibadan, 5 January 2025.
2. Mariam (Participant 2), in-depth interview with first author, Ibadan, 5 January 2025.
3. Mariam, interview.
4. Iyabo (Participant 4), in-depth interview with first author, Ibadan, 5 January 2025.
5. Yemi (Participant 8), in-depth interview with first author, Ibadan, 5 January 2025.
6. Yemi, interview.
7. Funmi (Participant 9), in-depth interview with first author, Ibadan, 5 January 2025.
8. Funmi, interview.
9. Funmi, interview.
10. Tomi (Participant 3), in-depth interview with first author, Ibadan, 5 January 2025.
11. Tomi, interview.
12. Tomi, interview.
13. Funmi, interview.

We have refrained from revealing the identities of the respondents and used pseudonyms. The interviews were conducted in strict confidence through personal communications on 5 January 2025.

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Theorising African Feminist Ethics: What, Why and How?

Sharon Adetutu Omotoso

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 volume[1] 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 (Ramose 1999) and Omoluwabi in West Africa (Dasylva 2016). Notably, culture remains a key component theorists use to analyse gender relations across African communities (Oluwole 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-fullness; 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 an 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 extalgic[3] (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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African Feminist Ethics Within and Beyond the Academy

Akosua Adomako Ampofo, Sharon Adetutu Omotoso and Titilope F. Ajayi in conversation with Mercy Amba Awudziwa Yamoah Oduyoye and Ria Boss

Akosua Adomako Ampofo, Sharon Adetutu Omotoso, and Titilope F. Ajayi held an intergenerational conversation on African feminist ethics within and beyond the academy with renowned feminist theologian, Professor Mercy Amba Awudziwa Yamoah Oduyoye[1] and Ghanaian-Burkinabé R&B/soul singer, songwriter, and activist, Ria Boss. Aunty Mercy, as she prefers to be called, spoke with us from Akosua's home in Accra, where Titilope is also based, while Ria and Sharon joined via Zoom from Paris and Bochum, respectively. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Akosua Adomako Ampofo (AAA): Good morning, everyone. On behalf of *Feminist Africa* (FA), thanks for joining us. One of the special aspects about FA is that we don't just provide academic-type pieces. There are also conversations and interviews. So, for this issue, Sharon and I decided to have a conversation with women that we believe can speak to the theme of feminist ethics.

Sharon Adetutu Omotoso (SAO): In this issue of FA, we are interested in how to theorise feminist ethics in a philosophical context, and we want to speak with people who are on "the ground", so to speak, and doing very important work through music, arts, the environment, religious practice, and so on.

Titilope F. Ajayi (TFA): I'm currently working with the Institute for Security Studies based in Nairobi as a senior researcher on a project to do with security governance in Africa. But my research interests are very much centred on gender, with a particular focus on women, feminist and women's movements, and politics on the continent. I'm excited to be here and I'm looking forward to the conversation.

AAA: Thank you, Titi. Now to our two guests: imagine yourselves on a stage somewhere in the universe. A mic is thrust in your face, and you're supposed to introduce yourselves. Take it away, Aunty Mercy.

Mercy Oduyoye, a.k.a Aunty Mercy (AM): I generally would say, my name is Amba Ewudziwa. Because we have forgotten that we were given names on the eighth day before later being baptised in church or somewhere and getting married and forgetting the name we were given on the eighth day. I decided I wasn't going to allow anybody to forget that. So, my real name is Amba Ewudziwa. My father was Yamoah. Then, as the British and the Christians came and "taught" us, my father gave his name to his wife and to everybody else.

My mother was Mercy; I have a feeling my father didn't want to lose the name Mercy, so he also called me Mercy. So, both his wife and his first daughter are Mercy. I was Mercy Yamoah until my thirties, when I became Mercy Oduyoye, and recently I have decided I am Mercy Yamoah Oduyoye. In the international world and Nigeria, I'm known as Oduyoye. In Ghana, they can't even pronounce the name, so I may as well relieve everybody by saying, I am Yamoah. So, if you're looking for Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Yamoah, that's me.

All my schooling was in Ghana, in Methodist schools – Mmofraturo, then Achimota School, then Legon [University of Ghana]. Before Legon, I attended what used to be called "Tech" – the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology – for my teacher training. I have taught everywhere from kindergarten to supervising PhDs, and I have taught in many countries. In my retirement, I decided community work was important and have been involved in a variety of feminist and theological grassroots projects. This is how I began the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture as part of the Legon Theological Seminar in 1999.[2]

Ria Boss (RB): It's a pleasure to be here with you all today. I'm Ria Boss, short for Maria Bossman. I am a singer, songwriter, and performer. I had my basic schooling at Ghana International School, and went on to SOS-Hermann Gmeiner International College, which is a boarding high school in Tema, Ghana. I then left to the [United] States, and I was at the Eugene Lang School [College] of Liberal Arts in New York, where I got my BA in Culture and Media Studies. I then went on to get my MA in Media Management. I'm a performer

– I sing, I write songs, and I hold songwriting workshops. I'm also the creative team lead, programme facilitator, and content creator for an organisation called Black Girls Glow, which was founded by Poetra Asantewa, my dear sister and partner in business.

Black Girls Glow was founded to foster collaborations between women creatives in Ghana. It started as a sound residency but has since turned into a cluster of programmes. Our sound residency is called Kushka, and then we also have "You Are Cared For", which is an audio-visual initiative that uses art and pop culture as a sexual health advocacy tool for young women. I'm also involved in a writing workshop, "Casting Spells", which is aimed at helping young women delve deeper into themselves to help make their writing even stronger. I am also the co-founder of "Ria Boss Performance", a live performance and open mic platform, which is an event platform for more established artists. So yeah, I'm excited to be here and part of this conversation today, and to learn from all of you.

SAO: Thank you very much. Ria, this will go straight to you. We recognise that we all inhabit multiple identities and spaces. How did you come to do what you are doing, or to be where you are today? And in what ways do you think that will help our conversation on feminist ethics and praxis today?

RB: I think it's impossible for me to answer this question without thinking about the women that raised me, my grandmother and my mother – strong, sort of feminist women themselves – learning how to be resilient and seeing women at the forefront of many things. And so, because of that, I think from when I was very young, I've always strived to take up space. I guess you could say a lot of my songwriting revolves around empowering women, and that really came from my mother, to be honest, watching her in her various work environments, in the spaces where she used to be. Sometimes, she was the only woman in that space.

So, a lot of my inspiration comes from that, and then again, I think my music practice has brought me into feminist spaces, working with people like Poetra Asantewa. Because of that relationship, I became a member of Black Girls Glow. I had just moved back to Ghana – this was 2017 – and was tapped by Poetra Asantewa to take a place in the first residency. She called me and six other women artists to be a part of the first residency, and each of us, in our

own ways, was using our art practice to uplift women, or to speak about issues surrounding women, or African women to be specific.

That's how I first got in contact with Black Girls Glow. Then, after the songwriting residency, I took on a more staff-type position because I realised I wanted to be able to do more than just write the music. I wanted to also be in the background helping young women artists uplift themselves, such that they could be in positions that we are all in as well. And that led me to working with Black Girls Glow. I help with the workshops, be it songwriting or storytelling – guiding women to find themselves through music and songwriting; and we've been doing this for the last eight years, excluding [2020] the pandemic year. So far, we've seen over 40 women through the residency programme, and I've seen all these women go on to do amazing things with regards to not only uplifting themselves but also using their practice to uplift other women. At the core of it all, what I write about and what I believe in, is making sure that women feel empowered, heard, and seen, and creating spaces for them.

AM: I think I should start by saying that I was never a theoretician; I just went with the flow. When things happened, and especially if I didn't like them and I wanted to react or respond, I just went ahead and did that. And I looked for people who would support me to do the crazy things that I have done. I think one of the things that I am mostly known for is the creation of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and I did that because I was the first African woman to have a university degree in Christian Theology.

I was getting called to come and talk, and write, and so on. And I felt one tree does not make a forest, so, I started looking for other women, and I wasn't finding them. So, I decided something must be done. There must be women theologians somewhere. And that's how, by 1989, together with some other women, we've been able to call together almost 80 women to come to Trinity [Theological Seminary] to create the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Last year [2024] they said it was a homecoming. The excuse was that they were coming to celebrate my 90th birthday. So, they all descended on Trinity, and we had a wonderful time. I was so moved because I had no idea that the Circle would do what it has done, but I'm so grateful to the women who supported the idea and helped to create it. The first time I was trying to hold a women theologians meeting, I went to Professor Idowu of the Religious

Studies Department in Ibadan. When I asked Idowu to come and speak, because I was going to have this meeting, he said to me, "We don't even have men theologians; now you're talking about women theologians." But now, come and see what happened! He came all the same, and he gave us what has become almost our mantra: "A bird with one wing does not fly." He said he was expecting women to become the second wing of African theology and that if our wing develops, African theology will fly. I think that is what we have tried to do: to make sure that when we say African theologians, we are not only thinking of men, and that we have women theologians as well.

When I was about to retire and I looked for a place to retire to, I decided to retire in Ghana, not in Nigeria, because having chosen an area that is so controversial, working with women when nobody wants to work with women, I wasn't going to also do it in a "foreign country". I was going to do it in my own country, so that if people are plotting to do something to me, somebody will come and tell me in Twi, in my own language, "Hey, be careful, so and so is going to do such and such." If I'm in Ibadan,[2] and they say it in Yorùbá, maybe I will not understand.

So, I decided to relocate to Ghana to start the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture. The thing about both the Circle and the Institute is that they are multi-religious. My underlying word has always been *religion*. I wasn't talking Christian, African Traditional Religion or Islam; I was talking religion as it affects women's lives in total. So, the programmes that we had in Trinity were always multi-religious. And then we always had the queen mothers[3] come and make sure that we were doing the traditional bits properly. The Muslim bit caught some people in Trinity; they were not very happy, but they were not able to tell me not to include Islam. I just did what I wanted to do, I said I didn't care, *because* they are religious people, and I'm talking about women and religion. So that's me.

AAA: Thanks, Aunty Mercy. Because we all have multiple identities and work with and from our different identities, I'd like you both to say what it means to you to be an African woman and explain if you identify as feminists.

RB: Okay, I would say it's sort of living in a space that's both rich in culture and heritage, yet fraught with a lot of challenges and contradictions; reconciling the past and the present but embracing the strength of our communities. I think

being an African woman today also involves a lot of responsibility to confront and challenge the forces of patriarchy, and our colonial legacies, and structural inequalities that I think still exist. And so, for example, with regards to music, I think being an African woman today, is looking at people like Mzbel who create anthems on [sexual] consent. I think that some of the intersecting systems that affect everything from economic opportunities, access to health, etc. alongside all the struggles that we have, African women have always been at the forefront of change. And so, I feel that drawing from the strength of our ancestors and communities, we build a more inclusive Africa.

I definitely do identify as a feminist and an African feminist at that. I think a lot of feminism has been appropriated from the West, and I don't think it's like a copy and paste when it comes to African women. African feminism for me is about addressing issues that are very specific to our own communities. And when I think about, for example, one of the reasons why Black Girls Glow was founded, it was because Poetra Asantewa saw that there was a gap, right? A lot of creative women did not have spaces where they could feel uplifted. And so, our answer to that was to create a space where women were at the centre, where feminism means insisting on dignity and respect for all people. It's about recognising that while we as African women have shared struggles, it's also very specific to our regions, to where we grew up, to class, to gender, etc. And so, yeah, I identify as a feminist.

AM: Well, the language of feminists in the '60s and '70s was really very negative. And when I started working with women and people were asking me, especially Americans, whether I was a feminist or a womanist, I used to say, look, English is not my language, so I don't know what feminist means, and I don't know what womanist means. All I know is that I'm working with women and for women's interests. So, I just labelled myself as an African woman theologian. But when people refer to me as a feminist, I say fine, why not? A feminist is a human being who recognises that women are human. So, whether it's a man or a woman, and you treat women properly as children of God, fine. I will relate to that person, and I will call that person a feminist if they want to be called feminist. So, I was working in a period when, you talk about feminist, then you immediately go to the stupidity of burning bras in the streets and things like that, which was far from what my interests were. I don't care whether you are wearing a bra or not wearing a bra. My interest is, are you behaving as

a human being to yourself and to other people? Are you interested in the humanity of women and of women's participation in creating the kind of world that we think God wants us to live in? If we don't take care of ourselves as women, who is going to take care of us? So that is my feminism, and I still hold on to that.

AAA: And what does it mean for you to be an African woman today? How has it changed over the course of your life? We do care work, but who cares for us?

AM: I have never been anything else but African, so I don't know whether it has changed. You see, because some of the things that were labelled as Western, they were extraneous. My mother's uncle, Nana Dickson, would not let me go to Wesley Girls' High School because he sent my mother there and she turned up like a European woman, drinking her tea with her cup like this, and with a pinky finger, and breaking her bread instead of directly biting into it, because that was what the image of a white woman was. None of this was my lifestyle being a Black woman; and, of course, me, I'm not just *Black*, I am *really* Black with a skin that you can recognise as being Black. So, I didn't have any other image of myself than being an African woman. And then I spent so much time in Europe and America that I could be nothing, but a Black woman.[4] I wasn't even conscious that I was a Black woman. I was just conscious that I was a woman with a big tongue who is always talking, and that's that. And I always said exactly what I thought needed to be said, whether people wanted to hear or not, whether it was polite or impolite, I just said things as they were. So that is what being an African woman means to me. You see, when I'm talking about African women, I'm looking at somebody like my grandmother, my father's mother. When they first moved from Apam [in the Central Region of Ghana] to go and live in Asamankese [in the Eastern Region], there was only a Presbyterian church there.

My grandmother came from a family of Methodists. They were Wesleyans, as they called themselves in those days. So, my grandmother would not go to the Presbyterian church and gathered the Fante women in her area [Kwamena] around her mud oven, and they would sing *ebibindwom* [African songs]. Why? Because, she said, the Presbyterians – *Baselfo*[5] don't know how to sing. So, my grandmother was like that, and I'm a little bit like her. I just say things as I see them, and it is her Fante lyrics that created the Methodist Church in

Asamankese.[6] So, you must do things like that to open new avenues to things that we could be doing. So being an African woman means opening ways where African women can find fullness of life the way you have experienced it, or the way you think it should be experienced.

AAA: Okay. Sharon, how will you extract the ethics aspect of this from our guests?

SAO: From what Ria and Aunty Mercy have said, I see a consciousness, a recognition of a woman's placement, her African position, African ideals, thoughts, and values. And these things are embedded in the kinds of work that they do with women, the music they write, and, of course, I also see the intergenerational connections. Ria talked about her grandmother and mother; Aunty Mercy also talked about her grandmother and mother. And so, you see, the intergenerational linkages of the values. That for me is how they describe being an African woman. It's never a singular thing and I appreciate that. That leads me to ask the question, what does feminist ethics mean to you, Ria?

RB: I think that Prof. [AAA] said something really beautiful when she asked, "As women, who is going to take care of us?" And when we think about feminist ethics, that for me is the question that guides how I even move with the framework that I use. I prioritise things like equity, empathy, care, a deep respect for everyone's lived experiences. And when I say everyone, here I'm referring to women's lived experiences, because all our lived experiences can be very vast and very different. But how do we hold space for these multiplicities, for example? I think that feminist ethics also challenge traditional moral structures that sometimes reinforce harmful hierarchies and sometimes silence voices. So, in my work, I try as much as possible to echo or answer that question of who is going to take care of us, and also, who is going to humanise us?

That for me, is what feminist ethics is. It's not just about advocating for women's rights, but it's also about fostering a more inclusive society for all. It also demands that we examine our own personal relationships and critically evaluate the institutions around us – policies, cultural norms that sometimes perpetuate very harmful stereotypes of inequality. I try as much as possible in everything I do, to always ask myself – well, first, what my mother would do [laughs] – but then, secondly, how is what I'm doing going to help a sister or

my aunt or my cousin? How are these found in the ways in which I'm trying to also practise my art? How will a young girl find inspiration from that to also help somebody coming after her? So, this is what feminist ethics means to me: it means in everything that you do, again, ask yourself that same overarching question of who is going to take care of me, or who is going to take care of my sisters?

SAO: How do we do this? And who is going to take care of us? Is feminist ethics all about care? Because we keep hearing and reading specific writers arguing that care puts more burdens on women who already don't have time to care for themselves. We care for everybody – who cares for us? Is it all about care? What about justice or equity?

RB: I would say that care definitely is something that we all gravitate to. But you're right. It isn't just about care. It's also about justice, about more than just looking to us as taking care of everyone. It's also looking to how do we make sure that systems in place take care of us, but also find justice for us? How is it that we find not just women's voices to create this care, but also bring in allies as well? So, I think this is actually something that I'm so glad you brought up, because I also sometimes realise that I go into that conversation a lot with "care" leading first, but then I realise, too, that justice is something that's as important.

AM: Yeah, I think the emphasis on equity is what I will bring to the table, because justice, fine, but sometimes there is a nuance between what is just and what makes for equity. And if equity in simple language would mean treating human beings equally, giving them equal space and opportunities to develop themselves and contribute to the community's good, then we are working with equity. There may be some justice somewhere there, but equity is the equal participation that everybody has a right to bring to the table.

AAA: Where does solidarity fit into feminist ethics or ethics in general for you, that recognition that someone is a fellow human and so I must be for and with them? Aunty Mercy?

AM: Solidarity, of course, is the image we have of how women should treat one another and how they should support one another, especially when they are doing things that are just and right, and things that promote the humanity of the whole community. And you can't be in solidarity with somebody who is

working for your detriment. So, you stay in solidarity with those who are working for your good and for what you believe is the good of the community. That's how I see solidarity.

RB: Yeah, I also agree with that, as finding community. So, solidarity is also making sure that you're in community with those that share the same ideals as you. That will also help in uplifting all the different messages that you have. I know that from my work, let's say with music, I find that a lot of the different women creators, artists that I work with, we all have similar approaches to how we view our feminism, or what it is we are fighting for, whether it is in writing our music or it's in the books that they're writing, etc. But it's also in finding community in that work. So that's how I also see solidarity.

AAA: I'm going to push the solidarity thing a little further. So, Aunty Mercy, in your Circle of feminist theologians, there will be theologians who, for the most part, you agree with. Ria, you are working on your music with like-minded musicians. But then there will be areas of disagreement, right? How can we do solidarity work while taking account of our diversity and sometimes contestations? For example, for the Network of Women's Rights in Ghana, an area of disagreement for us was how involved we should be when it comes to the rights of LGBTQ+[7] people. Some of us would argue that discrimination is discrimination, regardless of the identities, or lifestyle choices of who is being oppressed, thus, we should be a voice for their freedoms. Others opine that, if we are not careful, our core message of advocating for women's rights can get diluted. Also, on Black masculinities, something that I work on, I've had feminist sisters say, "We haven't finished dealing with women's issues and now you're putting men and boys' concerns on the table; it can be a distraction." And, of course, I get it. For example, in our film, *When Women Speak,*[8] at some of the screenings, a man will ask (always a man), "Where are the men?" And a young creative on the team will ask, with an eye roll, "Can you read the title?" But our gender troubles do include men. So, from your experience, how have you dealt with disagreement in your spaces?

AM: Since you bring up masculinity, we had a Circle meeting in, I think, it was Yaoundé, in Cameroon, and that was when we staged a drama to show that it is necessary for feminist groups, for women's groups, to point out the necessity of being inclusive when it comes to men because, whether we like it or not, they

are in our homes as grandfathers, fathers, brothers, and sons, and we have to deal with them. So, if they have ways of life that we think are detrimental to women, we need to point it out to them. But if they are also being discriminated against because of women, then we need to discuss those issues as well. One thing that was always coming up, and I think not just in Ghana, but most parts of Africa, is this business of sending a girl child to school. But it also came to a point when we had to then say, masculinity is important, but it is not as important as sending the girl child to school. Because all these years that the boys are going to school, nobody was saying that the girls are being discriminated against. The minute we said, the girls are being discriminated against, and we should focus on them, then everybody is saying, the boy child is in trouble, so there's always a battle, a gender divide somewhere that when you want to focus, call attention to women's plight, women's rights, women's contribution, women's participation, then somebody is going to say, what about the men? And then when you say, okay, the men are part, they are part of the community, so we should look at their issues, then somebody will say, so what about the women? This means that we cannot focus on one gender without the other. Now, what bothers me is that when we stopped talking about women's studies and feminist studies, and so on, and started talking about gender studies and gender issues, then people were still treating gender as women.

In my church, the Methodist Church, they have a gender desk, which always had a woman as the head, and all the issues that they bring forward for discussion were by women and about women. I said, but that's not gender, where are the men? And then, when you point out that we are forgetting the men, then you are in trouble. So, it's an area that we have not been able to be comfortable with. But whether we like it or not, the men are here. They are troublesome, but they are our brothers and husbands.

RB: I think very similarly, we also get a lot of these issues of "why not men?" in some of the conversations with my peers. Prof. [AAA] was speaking about the LGBTQ+ community, and we might agree somewhat on many issues affecting them, and then some women within our circles feel very strongly against [addressing LGBTQ+ rights]. In those kinds of situations, I've come to look at it from the perspective of trying to first understand their point of view, and it's really important to put yourself in the shoes of someone else with regards to understanding. So, while I sometimes find myself in situations where we

disagree on particular things, it becomes a conversation. A friend and I, we disagree on LGBTQI+ rights, even though she identifies as a feminist. *I* believe that by that pure identification as a feminist, you should be able to understand the plight of the LGBTQ+ community. But for her, she comes at that discussion from a particular religious context, and I don't think it's fair for me to completely dismiss her or disapprove of where she gets that feeling from. I think that her position obviously comes from a particular understanding. Does it mean that her feminism is outright wrong? I don't agree with it, absolutely not, but my perspective is never to lead with conflict, but from a point of understanding.

AAA: Great wisdom from a young person.

SAO: So, what I hear from you both in trying to answer the question, what feminist ethics means to you is, it's not just care, but equity also, and then we raise the solidarity issue, the image we have of how women should treat one another. We agree that feminist ethics is also about learning to say "no" and to manage disagreement on complex settings. So, where does feminist ethics stay when there is a gender divide? That's what Aunty Mercy was talking about, and I hear that there must be an imperative to disallow a shutdown of core or fundamental feminist positions. So, when there are conflicts, feminist ethics tells you there are also feminist goals that must be defended. Does that reflect what you're trying to say?

RB: Yes, I think so.

SAO: Thank you. How much of who you are and what you do is informed or influenced by African feminist theory or practice? For Aunty Mercy, her roles in faith and theology are very important within feminist discourse, and within her field [religion], it is often blamed as the culprit of women's marginalised and even oppressed status. So how have you walked your ethical journeys among, or with, even against, male colleagues or other feminists?

AM: Well, I don't know how to start this, but, when I started the work I was doing, the language of feminism and womanism and women's rights and so on was not there. A lot of the things that come in religion, especially in Christianity, if Christians were really Jesus' people, as they are labelled, we would not have most of the conflicts that we have now, because of the basic ideas, even of

solidarity, of empathy, of concern for the good of the other person, that are embedded in Christianity.

You know, I am really a very basic, naïve, uninformed person [laughs]. So, I always go down to brass tacks or fundamentals. If you are the only woman on a staff of eight or nine, does that mean you are the one to make the tea when there is an office with an administrator, with a man who oversees the supplying of tea? No, but Professor Idowu would turn to me, or he would actually be sitting right opposite me, and he would look me in the face and say, "Mercy, can you now bring us the tea?" How do I answer that? I mean, first of all, I'm an African woman, well brought up. Idowu is an African man. He's older than I am. He's my boss, so what he says should be law, shouldn't it? Yeah, but really not for me, you know. I'm telling you this story because I walked around a lot of these things with my wisdom. I wasn't referring to Jesus or anybody but my own wisdom. Idowu said, "Mercy, can we now have tea?" I said nothing. I just got up; I went behind him where the phone was sitting. I picked up the phone, and I said, Mr Adeniyi, we are ready for tea. And then I came and sat back down, and the tea came. Haven't I brought the tea? [all laugh].

So, there have been a lot of these kinds of events in my life in dealing with these men, theologians. They thought they were walking around me, but I was walking around them most of the time with the way I treated the situations that they raised. You know, when I was in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, we women were having our discussion in Nairobi, about how we are going to do the next whatever it is we wanted to do and then talking about creating the Circle. Then, Appiah-Kubi asks me, sitting there, his legs stretched out, relaxed like he is the paterfamilias[9], "How can you women be planning these things and you don't tell us?"

AAA: Sorry, Aunty Mercy, who is Appiah-Kubi and what was his position?

AM: Appiah-Kubi was a very well-known African theologian in those days, and a Ghanaian. He was in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians; he was one of the founders, and he was really surprised that we, the women, had been meeting and then trying to create an association, and he – the man, the big man, the African man – we did not consult him; we did not tell him what we were doing. I said, "Are you a woman?" That's all I said to him. I'm calling a meeting of women. You are not a woman. So there! I have

several of these kinds of situations where I had to find ways of walking around these, my brothers, without really creating too much antagonism.

AAA: Ria, for you, as a younger feminist woman working with young people, sometimes you'll find an important place for an ethical choice in popular culture and, at the same time, pop music is often seen as a crime scene where the objectification and even abuse of women can occur. So, in Ghana, there was this semi-Me-Too movement against an important pop festival host who, while heralding feminism in public, was abusing his intimate partner in private. What can you say to these seeming or alleged contradictions for an African ethical feminist practice in the music industry?

RB: I think that was surrounding the Chale Wote festival that happens in Ghana every year. And one year we found out that one of the [male] founders of the festival, a self-proclaimed feminist, had actually abused the [female] co-founder.[10] I was quite close to them, so, watching that happen in real time was also a bit unnerving, because we have these individuals that can champion these spaces and say all these types of things about feminism and inclusion, and making sure women are at the forefront. But then, behind closed doors, they are not actually practising what they are preaching. You find that in a lot of the music industry; it is a crime scene! We do have a lot of music that still to this day completely objectifies women. You have the case of currently, for example, the big artist, who is now in court, because of situations surrounding abuses of multiple young women; and a lot of women have been coming out to say this.

In Ghana, we have specific rap groups who have also been said to have been abusing women, etc. But then you'll find that the music is still played in particular spaces. People are still working with these individuals, and when you confront them, they say, "Oh, you know, we still need to eat," or "we still need to be able to work with them because of their platform." I'm somebody that decidedly would never work with individuals that perpetuate those types of things, but I find that there are some individuals that still find themselves being able to work in those types of environments. And it's a tricky and complicated situation to navigate in the creative industry. And there are people that value what it is a person might be able to get for them with regards to networks or exposure instead of thinking about what it means ethically, what it means to work with them on that level.

So, my work with Black Girls Glow tries to always remind the young women that you need to make sure that the spaces that you're working with will take care of you, first of all, see you as equals, and treat you with the respect that you deserve. It's very difficult sometimes when we find ourselves in spaces with individuals that purport to be something that they are not, and we have a lot of that in the creative industry. We still have quite a long way to go, but, with me, I have cut ties with organisations, individuals, or artists that, for lack of a better term, do not respect women. I think that it's important that in our lived experience and practice we let individuals know that we won't stand for disrespect or abuse. It has cost me certain festival positions and particular opportunities, but I can sleep better at night. Also, it's setting an example for younger creative women coming up to know that we do not need to be in the spaces that will inevitably end up making you feel worse for wear, because another thing that we also find in the music industry is young women getting together with these producers, who sometimes come from a sexual side, which can become very murky. And so that's why, for example, a space like Vibrate Space exists. Black Girls Glow has a partnership with them where every Thursday it's open to women only, so that women can not only be the ones that are producing but also feel safe in these spaces as performers as well. That's why we do things like "You Are Cared For", which is our audiovisual programme for sexual education, to remind women of their bodily autonomy and their agency. So, little by little, we're trying to create the spaces that can combat all of the things, but we still have a long way to go.

TFA: I'm particularly interested in the creative space because we know how much sexualisation and abuse takes place there. What's your sense of how much your feminist ethics and approaches are changing not just the way women see themselves and how they handle these dynamics, but how men who dominate these spaces are responding to what is essentially a movement that you're building? How would you both say that men are responding in these spaces, both the music space, and the theological space?

RB: In the music space, when it comes to the men, some of them just don't respond at all.

AAA: If you don't mind naming names, have you been able to "convert" any influential men along the way?

RB: Let's see… I would say that a lot of the men that support Black Girls Glow identify as feminist men, and so, thankfully, we didn't have to convert many of them. But sometimes the men, especially in the creative scene, just ignore our messages; sometimes they act like it's [the exploitation and abuse] not happening. And sometimes they just get very uncomfortable. Subsequently, you might not be invited into those spaces when they're having contests, etc. But that's fine with us, because we've created spaces where we don't need them anymore.

SAO: Beyond creating your own space, have you had instances, perhaps a particular case, where you've had to stand as a group or as a body to deal with a particular issue?

RB: I would say yes, and that's in reference to the issues surrounding the Chale Wote festival, in that all of us women – and not just Black Girls Glow, but let's say the young African Feminist Collective – took a stand, and none of us go to the festival; and also, none of our peers go to the festival, they do not engage with any of the artists anymore. Recently, Black Girls Glow was asked by an artist to work on a combined project, and we were very interested. Then this person told us that the project would be showcased at the Chale Wote festival. Although, it came with pretty good compensation, we had to ask ourselves: what do we look like partnering with someone who does not even understand the history of what happened with Chale Wote? We discovered that this person had no idea. And we realised that there's a subset of individuals that have no idea that these things are happening, or no idea that the abuse happened to one of the founders. So that became a teaching moment for us to now tell this person what had happened. They were shocked and eventually did not go on to do the project with Chale Wote festival. They also ended up telling more of their peers of the situation. So that's one way that we've also tried to stand up against it.

AAA: Aunty Mercy, any similar experiences?

AM: Not similar. But I was talking about the Circle meeting that happened just last year. Trinity [seminary] is not very comfortable with what we're doing at the institute, because we bring in "all sorts", and so we were always at loggerheads with the administration. Now, when the senior women who came to the meeting at my house heard what was going on, they said, "No, no, we

have to go and see the president about this." So, four or five of them went to the president, at that time it was Reverend Professor Asamoah-Gyadu. They went to him, and they said, "What are we hearing about Trinity not wanting to do gender studies at the Institute? This was one of the things that you agreed to: to have the students do gender studies. Are you now cancelling it and frustrating Joyce?[11] Because you will not approve her programmes?" And these four or five women really gave it to him, and then he explained, "No, no, no, it's not like that. We will see to it that it is done properly. Joyce should insist."[12] Why should Joyce insist? She's brought the programme – approve it or don't approve it, you know. So, sometimes, when women get together and confront the powers that be, they [men] themselves come to look at themselves, see that what they are doing is wrong. I'm hoping that things are going to be better because the current president is saying, "Oh, we will look into all those things that the Circle women have brought to us." So, we just have to keep going.

AAA: Aluta continua!

AM: Aluta continua!

AAA: So, Aunty Mercy, for you, your faith, but also your theology, which is an academic thing, really, both are part of your life. In the beginning, you said religion and faith are not the same thing, right? And that's why you focus on religion to bring these diverse belief systems into the work that you do. So how do you walk that ethical journey with other people – women, men, Ghanaians, Africans, Christians, Muslims – when religion is often blamed for the bad, but the good is often not mentioned?

AM: Well, you know, I'm sometimes almost in tears because when we mention religion and its negative things, usually the people I'm with, being Christian, will say, it's the Muslims. See what they are doing in Iran. See what they are doing in Iraq. See what the Muslims are doing to women in Afghanistan. I said, "I'm not talking about what the Muslims are doing to Muslim women; I'm talking about what Christians are doing to Christian women." Even within religion, we can just look at other people and say they are the bad guys. But I look at the Christian faith, I look at what we do in church, and [sighs] the language... okay, it's the English language. But why is it that even when we translate into our own languages, we cannot make our language inclusive? We have created a God who is male, thinking therefore all males are gods and the

males want to be treated like God? And that is the thing that is very difficult to get rid of. When you try to point it out, even through the language, people just snicker at you, and they think, "Oh, what's it about?" This is just English language.

In the Methodist Church, we have a group, we call ourselves the Children of the Manse,[13] that is, the sons and daughters of ministers of the Methodist Church. During one of the months, they like to sing a hymn, "Faith of Our Fathers Living Still", blah blah. And I asked, why can't we just sing "Faith of Our Forebears"? Because for me, my faith is basically the faith of my mother, because my father, as a Methodist minister, was going around converting everybody in all the villages around, and the person who was doing early-morning 5 a.m. prayers with us at home – we used to call them *Ahamakye* prayers – was my mother. So, I'm not saying sing "Faith of Our Mothers",[14] but let's sing "Faith of Our Forebears", "Faith of Our Parents". You know, even simple things like that, it's very difficult to change in the church, very difficult to change the mindset. But every now and then, you meet a Methodist minister who thinks there's something in what these women are saying and we have to back them, we have to do something about it, and Asamoah-Gyadu, he changed "Faith of Our Fathers" to "Faith of Our Forebears" or something like that in one of the sessions. But it is true, people who quote the Bible to show how evil Eve and the other woman were: they're always the Jezebels.

SAO: I am just thinking about resistance, change, solidarity, care, justice, and equity. One thing that has touched me from both of you, has been how you've both been able to deal with contradictions, walking around situations, working them out to save women from all forms of oppression. We are discussing *African* feminist ethics, and Aunty Mercy talked about the wisdom to deal with antagonisms. So, there is a wisdom embedded in women with which we navigate spaces and that wisdom is very applicable when we are talking about feminist ethics. Scholars have problematised care as a single narrative, but feminists offer alternatives. So, there is feminist ethics of risk, discussing how women take or avoid risks. Both of you have talked about the risky things you have done, including ignoring financial benefit that could have come to you. My response to these kinds of situations is presented in the concept of "ethics of vigour", where I connect care, risk, courage, and proffer a mix while addressing a wide range of issues. So, besides feminist ethics of care, would

there be particularly homegrown theories that you think would better address our immediate challenges?

AM: The care is fine, but I think the word solidarity should be there somewhere.

RB: Yeah.

AM: Because when women are not in solidarity with each other, everything falls apart.

RB: Yeah.

AAA: How can we create the "women's community" in such a way that we are more or less on the same page, and in solidarity?

RB: I think I would echo that sentiment as well, that solidarity is extremely important. Again, that goes back to what I said earlier about being within community. That's how I see solidarity.

AAA: Aunty Mercy, what word or words would you use for solidarity in your language? In another context, some of us were recently very critical of the humanitarian "industry" and its language, and we asked our workshop participants, mainly PhD students and postdocs from across Africa, to define humanitarianism in their own languages. Some struggled more than others; some had a word, some had a sentence. How might we say "feminist ethics" in Twi or Ga? How about solidarity?

AM: If I was doing a sentence, I would say, "*Nipa ne nua ne Nipa*" or something like that. Because we have to recognise the humanity of the other person in order to be connected to them and to their needs, and connect their needs to our own needs.

AAA: So, a human being's sibling is another human being?

AM: Human being, yeah.

AAA: And the Akan say that not everybody walking around as an embodied person is human. Ria, back to Sharon's not-so-easy question: do you have any other thoughts on that, considering that a lot of what we are talking about has purportedly been most articulated in academic spaces or intellectual spaces. People who have a command of a language, probably a colonial language, theorise these things. But we have older people from our own communities who are very articulate in their languages because they were trained to speak the

language, use proverbs, and apply "native" wisdom, and so on. We don't see much of that with my generation and after. How can we move this theorising into those spaces so that people can understand? Some people are clueless about the unacceptable behaviours and the feminist actions that went on at the Chale Wote festival. They are clueless, not only because they didn't read the news item, but perhaps because they don't understand the ways in which abuse works and is experienced by others. So, please, your comments?

RB: It is the duty of the artist to be able to bring things that are more academic into contextualised language. That's why in my writings and songs I try to bring the theory into a more artistic and poetic perspective. That is how we are able to bridge that gap. I admit that sometimes because it's extremely academic, it might seem a bit daunting to some, but it's not daunting. It is a matter of also being able to understand it, because, as much as some people might not be able to understand the language, between community organisers, artists like me, market leaders, activists, we're all engaged in particular feminist principles. Maybe we just don't have the particular words or the language for these concepts, but they exist. And so, using, for example, Poetra Asantewa, with her writing, she simplifies things such that it can be understood a bit more deeply. We're seeing a lot more young women artists talking about really hard topics in their music, whether it's about abuse, equity, justice, or reproductive rights. In some of the new music, we have artists like Esther Legend or Annabelle Rose. We have Lily and Lola, Efya, who are all women who use their songwriting and their music practice to also speak to difficult subjects, simplifying some of what could be deemed as more academic, I guess.

TFA: I want to bring together the threads about colonialism and languages and translation, and ask you – artists like Efya, for example, have a particular listenership. It might be a class issue. How well would you say that the [feminist ethics] message is translating into other genres of music, and in other sorts of listenerships? So, people who, for example, tend to sing more in local languages have a different listenership would you not say? How well is the message transmitting across those different groups and among the people who listen to them?

RB: The message is translating. I go back to artists like Mzbel, who wrote the song "Sixteen Years" in the nineties, a song that was an anthem for young

women to be wary of men who would just come and [try to] abuse them. And she sings in Twi, for example. That's an artist that used her own platform to disseminate that type of information. It does translate, but I will agree that in certain cases, class comes into play, privilege comes into play with regards to the listenership as well. And so that's why it's also important for us to be able to collaborate across genres. For example, I collaborate with, let's say, Efya, or I collaborate with Abrewa Nana to be able to bridge those gaps.

AM: With the church, theology and Christianity, what the theologians write and what the preachers preach are very different. Most preachers speak in a way that the congregations understand, with anecdotes and proverbs. But when they get to writing, you take that theology book and it's full of words that you have never seen before, and I don't know why they do that. I have had people who have said to me, "Oh, Aunty Mercy, we can understand *your* writings." I said, what writings do you not understand? Then they will mention certain books [with male authors]. I would say, "But they were not writing them for you; they were writing them for the academy." They were writing them to get their PhDs and so forth. So that's where we are with this communication gap.

AAA: Both of you have talked about mothers and grandmothers, and it has been interesting for me in my work on masculinities. When I ask young men about the influencers in their lives, it's also their mothers and grandmothers. So the mothers and grandmothers are "doing all", as we say. Occasionally, a young man will mention a male pastor or teacher and so on, but they are much more likely – or as likely as young Black women – to see other women, mothers and grandmothers, as influencers in their lives, than fathers and grandfathers. When they do mention men, it's some "big" names. This leads me to ask you to offer a few more examples or anecdotes about women, or feminist figures, who have had the strongest influence on you. And what role has feminist ethics played in those relationships? Aunty Mercy, please go first.

AM: Well, with me, the first feminist in my life was my father's mother, Martha Aba. She should have been queen mother at Apam, [but she] got married, followed the husband to go to Asamankese to do cocoa farming. And Aba said when she got to Asamankese that she was not going to go and do any farming, because if she got a wound,[15] she could no longer go and be queen mother. My grandmother was just like that: she stuck to her guns, she did whatever she

thought was right for her and was, as I said before, the woman who ensured that she wasn't going to go to a church that doesn't know how to sing, so she would create her own group. Very few women will stand against their husband, let the husband go to his church while she does her own thing. But it is not always like that. My grandmother brought up a lot of other women, mentoring them, teaching them how to do this and that. She was going to church every day. I remember carrying her Bible and hymn book to church. At 5a.m., she would wake you up, and you will carry her books to church. Whether she was actually reading, I never got to know. I didn't ask, but when you're going to church, you have to carry books. So, I carried the books, and we went to church. That was my grandmother.

The other woman who later came into my life, way back, was Florence Ansaah Cofie, wife of a medical doctor. Their cars always had the numbers 50-50 on them, whatever the car was. So, one day I asked, "Why are all your cars numbered 50-50?" She said, "Ei! Between me and my husband, it's always 50-50. I mean, if he's earning 1,000, he brought 500; if I'm earning 100, I brought 50. So, it doesn't matter the amount; the percentage is the same. Both of us are contributing 50-50." And that taught me that in marriage, especially today, the way people are looking at marriage, it's either dependency on the man or, as these days, boys always looking for girls who already have houses. That's not it. It is two people trying to work together.

I was also impacted by Annie Jiagge, who was a High Court judge here in Ghana. When Annie Jiagge came to teach in Achimota School, she was Annie Baëta [her name before marriage]. She had just finished her law degree. I think she was the first woman lawyer in Ghana. So those of us in Achimota at that time, we were all over her. Later she was very, very influential in the church and in the World Council of Churches and so on. And in one conversation, Annie Jiagge said to me, "A marriage is a woman's civil death." We were talking about naming, and I asked, "Why?" She said, "You will see; you're getting married, you will see how everybody will forget that you were Miss Yamoah." And later it became so clear, because Trinity was trying to name the women's hall, which she was instrumental in getting the money for, and I was trying to get Trinity to name the hall after Annie Baëta, and they were not going to do it.

[So,] I went to Nairobi. There was a boy at the All-Africa Conference of Churches, an accountant, who was Ewe who belonged to the EP [Evangelical Presbyterian] Church. So I was telling him about this naming thing, our asking [Trinity] to name this building after Annie Jiagge, and then he says, "Who is Annie Jiagge?" I said, "Okay, do you know, Professor Baëta?" He says, "Yes." I said, "Oh, you know Professor Baëta, but you don't know Annie Jiagge? Professor Baëta is the [elder] brother of Annie Baëta." He then says, "Oh, you didn't say Annie Baëta; you said Annie Jiagge." So, Annie Baëta is dead, and nobody knows Annie Jiagge. That experience influenced me a lot. There are several other women like that who, it is short vignettes, their lives and their sayings come to my mind when I'm looking at women's influence in the world, and whether we can do better than what we have done so far. Is that okay?

AAA: Yes, unless you want to mention any names. Ria, your go.

RB: I always, always bring up my mother again, because I think she's one of the biggest influences. Just to give a bit of context. She is Anna Bossman, and for a large part of my childhood, she was the Deputy Commissioner of the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice here in Ghana. She later became the Acting Commissioner for Human Rights and Administrative Justice, and, honestly, watching her in that position truly impacted me because I saw exactly how almost every case she took up was on behalf of women and children. There were some instances where she had to take a stance on behalf of the LGBTQI+ community. She's someone that has truly influenced the way I view myself and my feminism, and she would say that she got that from her mother. And so, my grandmother definitely is another influence on the more creative side, I would say.

Another huge influence for me is Nina Simone. In fact, much to the frustration of my mother, I call her my second mother, through her practice – not only within the civil rights movement, but also in her music practice as well. Eartha Kitt is another artist who's also really influenced the way I view myself, especially because she had really strong views about being a strong woman without a man, influencing women to see themselves as empowered, and to uplift themselves, and to see that they are not just equal, but also sometimes even more powerful than [men]. As a young girl, that's something that really influenced me and helped me to see my place in the world.

AAA: Sharon has a question for us on culture and praxis.

SAO: Thank you so much. So, African gender culture and practices, as expressed in proverbs and other cultural artifacts, has tended to be cast in a negative light as far as women are concerned. And Aunty Mercy has said some things about that today, and also you have addressed this in your book *Daughters of Anowa*. What wisdoms or learnings do you think we can derive from our Indigenous cultures and cultural tools to help us expand the African feminist ethics project or the African feminist archive, as the case may be?

AM: Well, my immediate response is one of exasperation, because people are picking our cultural understandings, artifacts, proverbs and doing things with them that were not the original intentions. I recently heard that in Canada they have named a street Sankofa Road, or something. Now, the worst thing that can ever happen to me is to open this blessed phone that is now in our hands – that tells you things that you don't want to see – and to see Trump holding the Sankofa bird. Trump, I don't know what interpretation he is giving to Sankofa. But you see, the modification had already come from the Arts Centre here in Accra, where the artists have put an egg into the beak of the bird. I was at the Arts Centre, and I asked the boy, "Why have you put an egg in the beak of a bird? Have you ever seen a bird with an egg in the beak flying around?" He said, "No." But what the boy was trying to say is that our mothers are always forgetting us, their children, and the Sankofa bird is saying, "Go back and take care of your children."

AAA: Wow!

AM: This business of mothers and children has become one of the images that you cannot resist [or] get away from. What about fathers and children? Do they have a stake? Then what happens to children? So I was explaining to this young man, "Look, I have been with Owura Amu, Ephraim Amu, in Achimota School, in Tech, in Legon, always in his choir and he explains all these things every time clearly. And what he's saying is when the bird turns its beak, it goes to the tail – the thing that we call *tsofi* [turkey tail] – and it dips the beak into the glands, and fat comes on the beak, and it uses the fat to preen its feathers."

AAA: Wow!

AM: That is it! So, what the bird is telling us is: go back, pick the good things that you have left behind to come and do something good in your life. Yeah, and the song, "Ɔkofɔ Kwesi Barima aa wommpɛ biribi ayɛ" [meaning men who do not look for anything/any work to do].[16] First of all, in Akan, you don't say "Kwesi Barima", it's always "Yaw Barima." So, if the man is calling himself, "Kwesi Barima", it means he's even crazy: he doesn't even know his own language and he doesn't know what he is doing (even his name is wrong). Now, the Sankofa bird has become so popular that Donald Trump is seen using that Akan sacred symbol of "go back and pick up the good things in your background and use them to correct and to enhance the present." I'm just praying that if there is something to enhance, that he's going to use the Sankofa symbol to do it. But, God forgive me, I am still trying to find out. So, the traditional things, they are there, but they are there for us to use judiciously.

It's not everything in the culture that can be used in a positive way and people can pick up positive things and bastardise them. I was once talking about Bolanle Awe, and others asked me to come and speak at [the Institute of] African Studies at the [University] of Ibadan. That was because I had a paper that was about [Akan] proverbs in traditional culture and the research[17] I did to get those proverbs and to get that paper,[18] I have never forgotten. There's so much in our culture that we don't know what to do with. We don't even know them anymore because nobody is talking about them or teaching them. I hope that we will discover the things that are positive in culture and use them ourselves positively before people get hold of them and use them for the wrong reasons.

AAA: Even though the question was for you, Aunty Mercy, Ria, would you like to comment, especially as you're from a different generation? And Aunty Mercy told us her age: 91 this year. Ria, we'd like to know how old you are so that, when people read the piece, they see the cross-generational difference that binds you.

RB: I'm 34 but turning 35 on the 24th of November [2024]. Very excited about it. I don't really have a comment on this, but I do feel that when it comes to some of our proverbs and cultural artifacts, a lot of us, especially, let's say, my own peers and younger, there's so much that we don't know. There's so much that we can learn, especially from our elders, and as I sit here, I feel like I've

learnt a lot – especially about the Sankofa symbol/concept – that I did not know. I also think cross-generational wisdom sharing is important for us to bridge that gap in having more conversations with our elders, such that we can bring this into our practice as well.

AAA: And the future of feminist ethics: what do you both see as happening, what s*hould* happen, what do you see as your roles in making what should happen happen?

AM: We can all still find it interesting or useful to read the proverbs and learn, so they were talking like this? I am glad that at least there is still some interest in what was going on in the past and that this can be found in what I have written. That's what I hope for the future. Because, you know, I belong to the generation that was reading Chaucer, and so on – all those fun, fantastic English languages. And sometimes I'm asking myself, what are you reading Chaucer for? I don't want my work to become like Chaucer today to the younger generation.

RB: I think the future is about continuing to be strong in the work that we're doing, continuing to recruit, so to speak, and to not ever become discouraged. For example, something like Black Girls Glow that we founded in Accra, next year: we're going to be moving to Kumasi, something that we hope to also take outside of Ghana, to maybe Nigeria and South Africa. We already have a programme where we cross-collaborate with the Berlin Music Board, and African women that are in Berlin as well. And so, continuing to do the work, continuing to create these bridges cross-culturally, but also within our own community, we can't stop, we have to keep going.

AM: Let me add that one thing that Trinity may be doing, that I'm really praying happens, is that they are going to continue the work that we are doing at the Talitha Qumi Centre and they create the Feminist Theological Research Centre or something out of what I was doing. So, I am thankful for that and it's a man who is spearheading that. So, I'm thankful that at least there will be a couple of men, together with the women, who will modify the male-centred work, because, otherwise, what's the point? The visions that I had will be modified, but at least the trend of inclusiveness of women and inclusiveness of community will be there. So, I'm very happy about that; it assures me that our work will go on and on.

AAA: That will be a legacy!

SAO: About the future of African feminist ethics, I see you talk about relevance, continuity, and co-creation. And these are very important things that we must factor into the future. The fight continues. The struggle is real and the realities that we face keep changing, but they are still in the same name – oppression. Whatever it is, we have to keep our work relevant.

AAA: Okay, I say a big thank you to both of you, Aunty Mercy and Ria, and to my colleagues Sharon and Titi.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to our interlocutors, and to Dr. Joyce Boham, Ebenezer Bosomprah, and Nana Akua Agyapong for diverse assistance in facilitating and organising Aunty Mercy's participation and approval of the final piece.

Notes

1. Aunty Mercy likes to remind people that, whatever her husband's surname might suggest, she prefers to be known as Amba Yamoah. Yet most of her books and official documents bear the name Oduyoye. She recalls, in her thirties, how at the Ghana Passport Office officials insisted her husband could not be issued a passport unless his name was linked to hers. Desperate to travel, they turned to a young acquaintance in the office who promised to "take care of it". On the day of departure, their passports were handed over, and she discovered that her maiden name had been erased and replaced with her husband's surname.
2. Aunty Mercy lived in Ibadan for about seven years.
3. These are traditional leaders/rulers in their own right.
4. When Aunty Mercy worked at the World Council of Churches, her immediate supervisor was a White Dutch man named Albert. She did, however, have some notable racist experiences in the Netherlands, including entering the pool at her hotel, at Albert's urging, only to realise that all the White people who had been swimming had got out.

5. Baselfo (plural) or Baselnii (singular) is the term for persons associated with the Basel Mission, a Christian missionary society based in Switzerland.
   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterian_Church_of_Ghana;
   https://pcgonline.org/brief-history/
6. Aunty Mercy's grandmother started the Methodist Church in Asamankese with her grandfather, and her grandfather's brother and his wife, making the Yamoah family from Apam the ones who started the church in Asamankese.
7. Aunty Mercy opines that the arrangement of the letters should have begun with "G" for gay men, because starting with "L" may place lesbian women at the forefront of public scrutiny.
8. A documentary on Ghanaian women's activism.
9. The term is Latin for "father of the family" or the "owner of the family estate". The paterfamilias was the oldest living male in a household and could legally exercise autocratic authority over his extended family.
10. Find links to reports of the allegations at https://labarijournal.com/has-ghanas-chale-wote-street-festival-lost-its-shine/; https://africanarguments.org/2020/02/could-metoo-moment-end-africa-biggest-arts-festival-chale-wote/; and https://medium.com/@sionneneely/speaking-my-truth-f0850d2752f1
11. Dr. Joyce Boham is the manager of the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture, which is attached to the Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Accra. The Institute is also known as the Talitha Qumi Centre, which is Aramaic and translates as "Maiden, arise!" or "Little girl, I say to you, arise!"
12. In 2016, Akosua Adomako Ampofo, first author in this conversation, was invited by Rev. Professor Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu to give a lecture to the students of Trinity College on gender issues in Africa.
13. "Children of the Manse" is an American term, according to Aunty Mercy, which was adopted by the children of Methodist ministers in Ghana, due to "Americanisation".

14. Interestingly, according to Aunty Mercy, somebody managed to change the lyrics of the Methodist Hymn 430 to "Faith of Our Mothers" (see https://hymnary.org).
15. Traditional leaders are not supposed to have any physical "blemishes". Should someone decide to seek a person's elimination from consideration, even a small scar could be used as a pretext.
16. This song was composed by the renowned Ghanaian musicologist, Ephraim Amu.
17. She was researching the 3,600 Akan proverbs collected by Reverend Johann Gottlieb Christaller.
18. The lecture on Akan proverbs is published by the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

Protest Arts, Gender, and Social Change: Fiction, Popular Songs, and the Media in Hausa Society across Borders by Ousseina D. Alidou. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2024.

Fulera Issaka-Toure

The over 250-page book, authored by the esteemed feminist scholar known for her critical works on Muslim women in Africa, Ousseina D. Alidou, a distinguished professor at Rutgers University, is a must-read for both specialists and non-specialists. In *Protest Arts, Gender, and Social Change: Fiction, Popular Songs, and the Media in Hausa Society across Borders*, Alidou has come out with another groundbreaking work on gender, protest and social change and transformation.

After a thorough reading, several issues for critical reflection arise. The first is the question: What is Hausa? The book raises important questions about the meaning of Hausa and what is embedded in *Hausaness*. These two are entangled with several ideas from folklore, cultural heritage, nativity, colonial history and colonial experience.

However, the one thing the author underscores strongly in the book, which is sometimes glossed over by existing scholarship, is the issue of Hausa or Hausaness being equated with religion, Islam in this case. The book makes it clear that Hausaness transcends religion, because Hausa speakers across borders follow three distinct religions: Islam, the majority religion; Christianity; and traditional Hausa religions, called the *Maguzawa.* Scholars of religion would view the Maguzawa as one of the variations of African Indigenous religions (Nrenzah 2024). In this regard, Hausa represents a shared space of all religions with the Hausa language and culture as the basis of Hausaness.

Here the book makes readers aware that being human first, and embedded in the Hausa tradition second, symbolises Hausaness, thus opening a critical area of academic debate and reflections on the question of religion

and Hausaness. This is vital because, as the book demonstrates through the prism of Boko Haram, religion is a tool used by all forms of individuals and groups to achieve certain aims. The tactics of Boko Haram are particularly devastating, but sadly, this is used to condemn all Hausa speakers irrespective of their ethnicity or religious affiliation.

Further, religion – Islam, Christianity and Indigenous religion – appears also to be a tool for confronting the pandemic of gender-based violence by deploying Hausa folklore, fiction and songs. Here, the three religions – Islam, Christianity and Maguzawa, the traditional Hausa Bori religion – tap into the language and culture of Hausa to protest gender-based violence, as one of the pandemics confronting Hausa society. Folklore's use of Christian gospel music, as well as Hausa Islamic sermonic songs, is aimed at sending particular messages to Hausa speakers irrespective of their religious affiliation.

Thus, Hausaness creates the possibility of unifying Hausa speakers. If Hausaness is also riddled with gender-based violence, as the book demonstrates, then, as elsewhere, the violence against women and girls has precipitated female rebellion as Mernissi (1996) puts it.

Further, the book makes a clear contribution to discourses on what is called "the public sphere" (Eickelman and Salvatore 2002). It specifically addresses the Hausa "public sphere," which is dominated by several individuals and groups with varied interests. However, as with any form of "public sphere," contestations and rebellions inevitably occur. On the one hand, contestations occur between the Hisbah group which, with political backing, has proclaimed itself the custodian of "the sharia" (Issaka-Toure and Alidou 2020) and on the other hand, lay Muslims, who use other mediums to reach out to the Hausa population across borders. In doing so, they evade the censorship of the Hisbah sharia boards and authorities, birthing competing publics and public spheres. Through this process, they diversify the public sphere via protests and artistic expression in Hausa societies across borders, with the explicit aim of transforming these societies.

Moreover, the author continues her sustained critique of the Structural Adjustment Programme of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, building on threads from her previous works. This is well demonstrated both in her *Engaging Modernity* (2005) and *Muslim Women in Kenya* (2013).

Both books emphasise the specific ways in which the Structural Adjustment Programme increased poverty in Africa, specifically entangled with the abuse of women and girls in Hausa societies across borders. However, here Alidou, the astute theoretical linguist, employs intersectionality to highlight the challenges society faces, particularly women and girls, who bear the brunt of the Structural Adjustment Programme, which she calls one of the "pandemics", including entrenched patriarchy, HIV and the coronavirus.

The above notwithstanding, another critical intervention of the book is its focus on women's agency within specific cultural norms. This highlights the insightful contribution of Mahmood's works on the ways in which gender norms are not merely reactions aimed at transforming a thing or person, but also reflect the specific capacities of individual women within a given cultural context and its constraints (Mahmood 2005). It ultimately links to the broader notion of feminisms including African feminisms (Decker and Baderoon 2018) and Islamic feminism within the sub-strata of African feminisms (Decker 2015; Edwin 2006; Badran 2011). All such feminisms speak and challenge western feminism which comes with its own cultural, racial and contextual issues that do not necessarily reflect other contexts, religions and individuals. It is here specifically that Alidou's work makes another critical intervention.

Finally, the book offers a reverse reading of Said's *Orientalism* (1979), in which Alidou demonstrates how one can describe one's own societies and culture using one's own language as a resource. Overall, the book offers, in addition to the above, a vital resource for scholars and activists. Scholars of linguistics, languages, cultural studies, Islamic studies and religious studies, as well as students, will find the book useful.

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