

Editorial

Editorial: Special Issue: Understanding Disability in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

This essay provides an overview of the Special Issue: Understanding Disability in Sub-Saharan Africa, and briefly outlines its intentions and the thematic content of the issue.

Keywords: Sub-Saharan Africa, disability, human rights, decolonial

Ways of understanding disability in much of the world are heavily influenced by Western-dominated scientific and medical representations of the body. The understanding of disability in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa is largely dependent on the Western models embedded into African societies during colonisation - those that the *United Nations Toolkit on Disability for Africa* calls the ‘older models’, which consist of the medical model and the charity model. However, more recently, there has been an increased interest in more inclusive and decolonial models of disability. These models instead explore cultural, ontological, religious, and aesthetic understandings of disability within African societies. The *United Nations Toolkit on Disability for Africa* signals that these ‘newer models’ of understandings of disability consist of the social model and human rights model (<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/disability/Toolkit/Intro-UN-CRPD.pdf>). But even

views such as these must still be interrogated, since the social model may still be profoundly shaped by western models of considering the body. Most importantly, such views may overlook indigenous understanding of wellbeing and care as they relate to disability and indigenous models of duties toward disabled people. Such views also fail to acknowledge that the concept of the human in the human rights model is normative, highly contested and fluid (Imafidon 2022b). On the other hand, a decolonial and inclusive perspective seeks to unearth and explore the positive and negative impacts of deeply entrenched cultural understandings of disability in all its dimensions and ramifications. This includes epistemological, ethical, medical, aesthetic, ontological, religious and other consequences for the wellbeing and lived experiences of persons with disabilities.¹

Sub-Saharan African cultures hold their own conceptions of disability. These may include explanations for, and representations of, different forms of disabilities, attitudes towards disabilities and persons with disabilities, ways of coping with, or managing health and other challenges related to disability, hermeneutics of the disabled body, social categories and institutions for dealing with disability, and the intersections of disability with diet, health, gender, colourism, orality, politics and art. These alternative explanations are not only long-standing in indigenous cultures and sustained from generation to generation, but they are also deeply embedded into the fabric of community life and everyday activities, and intersect.

These notions of disability are so prominent that they permeate daily existence and have real consequences for persons with disabilities. Consequently, it will do real harm and injustice to persons with disabilities in sub-Saharan Africa if attention is not paid to them in the research on disability in Africa, which remains largely shaped by the medical, charity and

¹ This special issue has emerged from a series of workshops held as part of the Disability and Inclusion Africa project, which is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Fund and the Global Challenges Research Fund. The project is interested in the impact of alternative explanations for disability on disabled persons, their communities, advocates and policy makers.

human rights models. In modern-day Africa, with the influx and growing impact of scientific explanation for disabilities into African places and growing awareness of medical and scientific models of disability, indigenous explanations and understandings remain intensely felt and continue to shape the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in these societies.

This special issue of the *Review of Disability Studies* consists of original articles and creative works that take seriously and explore some important aspects of sub-Saharan African perspectives on disability and their impact on understandings of disability and the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in African societies. This special issue focuses on communities in countries including Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe and general understandings of disability. It examines the lived experiences of persons with disabilities, as well as specific disabilities such as podocniosis (a skin disease that appears to be caused by exposure to soil irritants), albinism, autism, dyslexia, and visual impairment. As such, it brings together important theoretical, qualitative and artistic work on disability in sub-Saharan Africa. The articles cover themes and issues including cultural understandings of disability and diet, understandings and theorisation of moral obligations to persons with disabilities, and literary and poetic representations of disability. They explore African ontological foundations of disability, as well as linguistic, gender and economic dimensions, and questions of colourism. This special issue therefore shifts attention from a largely Western narrative to a decolonial, inclusive and indigenous understanding of disability in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Oche Onazi explores the moral obligation that emerges from, and the practical applicability of, African communitarian philosophy for persons with disabilities, proposing an asymmetrical conception of obligation and tax as a means to practically discharge obligations. Edwin Etieyibo examines the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of understandings of disability in sub-Saharan Africa and their connection with a holistic ontology that intertwines the physical and the non-physical, or


supernatural. Kenneth U. Abudu examines indigenous colourism in selected Nigerian cultures such as the Yoruba and the Esan, and how it provides a basis for understanding discrimination against persons with albinism. Francisca Anita Adom-Opare explores the fascinating connection between disability and dietary requirements during pregnancy by examining indigenous food taboos in Ghana.

Kidus Meskele and Enoch Acheampong et al. explore how indigenous understandings of disability in different sub-Saharan African communities in Ethiopia and Ghana respectively impact healthcare systems and practice. Firdaws Oyebisi P-Ibrahim deduces important indigenous understandings of disability in Nigerian cultures from selected Nigerian prose works, showcasing the physical and non-physical dimensions of disabilities. Chikuta, Chitambara, and Matura's qualitative study analyses how indigenous notions of disability impact employment and the economic life of persons with disabilities in the hotel sector in Zimbabwe. Jean L Cathro provides an interesting analysis of a sculpture made by Njabulo Hlongwane and the learners of Mason Lincoln Special School in Umlazi Township, Durban, South Africa. Finally, two creative pieces invite us to reflect on the implications of different understandings of disability in African places. The first is South African poet Kobus Moolman's 'Fourteen Critical Questions', and the second is a series of production stills taken from a web series directed by Karolina Wambui that portrays a young woman with albinism working in the matatu (bus) industry in Korogocho, a slum neighbourhood of Nairobi, Kenya.

While the articles in this special issue do not exhaust the study of indigenous understandings of disability in sub-Saharan Africa, it is our hope that they stir up the right conversations and interests that would enrich a decolonial and inclusive approach to disability studies.

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