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Vitality, Community, and Human Dignity in Africa



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Synonyms

[Creative power](#); [Life force in Africa](#); [Liveliness in Africa](#); [Non-Western foundations of human rights](#); [Respect for persons in sub-Saharan cultures](#)

Definition

Two values salient in the sub-Saharan tradition that are frequently invoked to ground the superlative, equal worth of persons and the human rights to which they are entitled are, first, vitality or “life-force” and, second, community or harmonious relationships.

Description

Many ► [human rights](#) theorists, moral philosophers, and jurisprudential scholars believe that the reason why human beings are morally so important is that they have a dignity. To have a dignity is roughly to have a superlative

noninstrumental value that deserves respectful treatment; there is some facet of characteristic human nature that is good for its own sake to a greater degree than anything else in the physical world and that grounds human rights. In virtue of what do human beings have a dignity? What is it that makes us characteristically worth more than members of the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms?

Western conceptions of human dignity are familiar to an English-speaking audience, with the claim that we are special in virtue of our capacity for autonomy or rationality being influential. The basic idea is that we have a worth that surpasses anything else in the natural world because of our ability to govern ourselves or to act in light of deliberation, rather than merely be determined by crude mechanisms such as instinct or conditioning. The work of German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant is the *locus classicus* of this approach. From this perspective, to accord individuals human rights is to respect their special ability to make voluntary decisions for themselves, and human rights violations, such as murder, slavery, and torture, are ways of severely degrading that ability.

Non-Western interpretations of dignity are much less well known. This entry focuses on two prima facie attractive conceptions of human dignity that are grounded on African thought. Calling a perspective “African” or “sub-Saharan” implies neither that all individuals or even societies indigenous to the continent or region have

held it, nor that no one beyond that region has done so. The label rather is meant to indicate that a perspective is common among those people and in that space-time in a way it has tended not to be among others elsewhere. Hence, “African” or “sub-Saharan” means views recurrently espoused by precolonial black peoples, particularly below the Sahara desert, and by those substantially influenced by them in contemporary discourses.

In the African tradition, one tends to encounter value systems that prize one of two logically distinct goods: vitality and ► [community](#). Some African thinkers take no view on whether one or the other is fundamental, simply placing them side by side as characteristic elements of sub-Saharan moral thought (e.g., Kasenene 2000). However, most of those who are philosophically inclined take one value to be fundamental to human dignity or morality, with the other to be derived from it. On the one hand, one readily sees how a small-scale, communal way of life typical of precolonial African peoples (on which see Wiredu 1992; Ejizu n.d.) would not only be grounded on, but also encourage, a communitarian ethic that takes ideas of ► [harmony](#) or cohesion to be of primary importance. From this viewpoint, the basic value is our communal nature, respect for which entails valuing other people’s lives or liveliness (for a clear instance, see Ejizu). On the other hand, there are African thinkers who maintain that vitality has ultimate worth, such that protecting communal relationships is instrumental for treating life with respect; if discord were to arise and community were to break down, then people’s lives or liveliness would be threatened (e.g., Magesa 1997).

Below the nature of these two values is sketched out in more detail, and they are drawn upon in order to articulate two theories of dignity that promise to account for human rights. Note that these theories are not intended to represent, in anthropological fashion, the views of a particular sub-Saharan people, let alone sub-Saharans generally. They are philosophical constructions that draw on and pull together in a principled form a variety of ideas about dignity and rights salient in African thought.

Vitality

In Western thinking, the main alternative to the Kantian view of dignity has been that it co-varies with the presence of human DNA in a living organism. Such a view is noticeably held by many of those theorizing in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, who maintain that human beings are children of God or made in God’s image. What makes humans special, from this standpoint, is that they have a soul, a spiritual substance that originated in God and that will outlive the death of their bodies. Where goes a living human being, there goes a soul, and hence a being with dignity. Although one can encounter this perspective in writings by Africans, particularly given the influence of Christianity below the Sahara, the notion of human life that is particularly salient there differs from it and is less familiar to international readers. Instead of a living human organism or spiritual substance – a thing – being sufficient for dignity, it is common among sub-Saharans to believe that it is a function of our degree of what is often called “life-force,” an energy.

Placide Tempels (1959) is well known among scholars of Africa for having written the first attempt to understand and relate African world-views to a Western audience and for having deemed the concept of life-force to be at their heart. Although his work has been criticized for overgeneralizing, one still finds contemporary African philosophers from a variety of sub-Saharan regions basing their ethics on the notion of life-force (e.g., Bujo 1997; Dzobo 1992; Iroegbu 2005; Magesa 1997). Life-force is traditionally interpreted as a valuable, invisible (“spiritual”) energy that inheres in everything, including physical or visible things. Everything in the universe, even an apparently “inanimate” object such as a rock, is thought to be good by virtue of having some degree of life-force. By this approach, plants and animals have a greater share of it than rocks, human beings have more than plants and animals, ancestors (whose physical bodies have died but who live on in an imperceptible realm on earth) have even more than human beings, and God, the source of all life-force, has

the most. Within this metaphysical picture, which is common below the Sahara, human dignity can be understood to be constituted by the fact that, of perceptible beings, we have the most life-force.

Like the Western prizing of human life, African respect for human life-force obviously grows out of religious thinking. However, such a moral perspective need not be tied to a supernatural base in order to be plausible. Often African thinkers make evaluative and normative judgments without appeal to spiritual ideas, at least not explicitly. For example, they say that a human being is special in virtue of being able to exhibit a superlative degree of ► **health**, strength, growth, reproduction, creativity, vibrancy, activity, self-motion, courage, and ► **confidence**, with a lack of life-force being constituted by the presence of disease, weakness, decay, barrenness, destruction, lethargy, passivity, submission, insecurity, and depression. One may usefully refer to this physicalist, energy-oriented conception of vitality as “liveliness” or as “creative power” (Dzobo 1992). According to one plausible interpretation of African ideas about vitality, then, what makes us more special than plants and animals, for instance, is roughly that we have a much greater liveliness or creative power than they (Deng 2004; Iroegbu 2005; cf. Metz 2012). Deeming our dignity to inhere in the capacity for creative power means that according human rights is to treat this capacity of others with respect and, correspondingly, that violating human rights is to severely degrade this capacity. It is plausible, on the face of it, to think that the innocent have rights not to be killed, enslaved, or tortured because such actions would grossly impair their capacity for liveliness.

Community

The second African conception of dignity that is worth addressing is the communitarian view, associated with the values of *ubuntu*, that our social nature makes us the most important beings in the world. As with the vitality conception, there are two versions of the community conception worth distinguishing. One traditional instance is the view that our dignity is constituted by our existing relationships with others and

imperceptible (“spiritual”) persons in particular. Roughly, the idea is that we are special insofar as we are always already interrelated with other supernatural beings such as ancestors and God (Bujo 1997; Cobbah 1987; Ilesanmi 2001). Let us address, however, the way that a less contentious metaphysical conception of community with a sub-Saharan pedigree might plausibly ground our understanding of human dignity.

Consider the following characterizations of community: “Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all” (Gbadegesin 1991, p. 65), and “the fundamental meaning of community is the sharing of an overall way of life, inspired by the notion of the common good” (Gyekye 2004, p. 16). There are two themes in these and other Afro-communitarian ideals, namely, the notions of sharing a way of life (or considering oneself a part of the group) and caring for others’ ► **quality of life** (or acting for the common good). Now, the combination of sharing a way of life and caring for others’ quality of life is comparable to what English speakers mean by a broad sense of “love” or “friendship.” A loving or friendly relationship more or less is one in which the parties think of themselves as a “we,” engage in common activities, act to benefit one another, and do so consequent to sympathy and for the other’s sake.

So, one attractive Afro-communitarian conception of dignity is the view that we have it in virtue of our capacity for loving or friendly relationships. We are characteristically more capable of community in the sense of “love” or “friendship” than are rocks, plants, and animals, and it is that feature that arguably makes us special in a way they are not. Deeming our dignity to inhere in our capacity for communal or friendly relationships means that according human rights is to treat this capacity of others with respect and, correspondingly, that violating human rights is to severely degrade this capacity. Prima facie, the innocent have rights not to be killed, enslaved, or tortured because such actions gravely disrespect their capacity to commune, specifically by exhibiting enmity towards them (Iya 2010; Metz 2012).

Applications

So far, two major sub-Saharan conceptions of what it is about us that gives us a dignity have been articulated, and in the following they are applied to some uncontested human rights, in order to illustrate some of their strengths and weaknesses.

Free Movement

Fans of human rights typically think that the state has a duty to let all its (innocent) legal residents decide where within its territory they would like to live or visit. Furthermore, they usually believe that the state has a duty to let those (innocents) currently residing in its territory emigrate to a new state, supposing the latter is willing to accept them. Forcibly containing any resident (who has not been fairly convicted of a crime) within a state or within a part of its territory is to violate human rights.

When thinking of prohibitions on movement, one initially pictures people being hemmed in and hence limited in their ability to express themselves and to develop in ways to which they are disposed. It would therefore appear that the capacity for liveliness would indeed be impaired if rights to movement were not recognized. The problem with this vitality-based rationale, however, is that restrictions on movement need not be narrow. Imagine a state that forbade one from visiting a small part of an overall large territory or a state that prohibited citizens from emigrating to certain countries but not others. The liveliness of typical American citizens would not be hampered if they were allowed to travel neither to Alaska nor to Cuba.

The friend of the vitality conception of dignity can suggest a second, different respect in which infringing rights to movement might constitute a degradation of vitality. Any coercion such as punishment is plausibly deemed to be a reduction of vitality, conceived as a matter of growth, activity, or self-motion. It is reasonable to suggest, then, that punishment, a reduction of vitality, is respectful only if it is imposed in reaction to a person reducing or threatening to reduce someone's vitality. To punish and thereby reduce a person's liveliness for something other than impairing

liveliness would degradingly treat the former's liveliness as worth less than for whatever she is being punished. Since crossing a border does not involve reducing anyone's liveliness, it would follow from this principle that it would be degrading of liveliness for a state coercively to restrict people's movement.

That is a promising rationale, but let us also consider one based on the community conception of human dignity. What the latter can say is that restrictions on freedom of movement are degradations of the individual's capacity to share a way of life with others. Sharing a way of life is not merely having a way of life similar to that of others; in its genuine sense it also includes selecting it for oneself in the awareness that others are doing the same. Part of what makes friendship valuable is that people have decided to come together, and to stay together, of their own accord. For the state to respect its residents' capacity for friendly relationships, it must let them choose with whom to commune and hence where to stay.

Political Participation

Most proponents of human rights believe that everyone should have an equal opportunity to vote on decisions affecting them and to hold public office. It would violate human rights to let some people's votes count more than others, often called "plural voting," or to deny some innocent, competent citizens the ability to vote at all or to become a member of the government.

To account for these rights, the friend of the idea that our dignity inheres in our capacity for vitality might draw on some ideas of John Stuart Mill, who in *Considerations on Representative Government* is well known for arguing that citizens are more likely to become passive and dependent, the less they participate in governance. When people are shouldered with the responsibility of collectively determining their own fate, they tend to become more active and self-reliant than when they are not. If so, then the failure to accord people rights to political participation could be reasonably deemed to fail to treat their capacity for liveliness as the most important value.

The general point appears reasonable, but note that it has a limited range of validity and cannot

easily capture all firm judgments about duties of the state to be democratic. Imagine a state that gave somewhat more votes to the intelligent and educated, in the expectation that their greater influence on political decisions would likely result in better outcomes for citizens' liveliness, a practice that Mill himself advocated. It does not appear that such a policy would be likely to make people passive and dependent, supposing everyone had at least one vote.

The community-based conception of dignity provides a different kind of underpinning for democratic rights. If what is special about us is, in part, our ability to share a way of life with others, that is going to include sharing political power, which of course determines how life is lived within a territory. And supposing we are equally special in virtue of having requisite capacity to share a way of life, that means according people the equal ability to influence collective decision-making, which, in turn, means having an equal vote and the opportunity to determine laws and policies.

Informed Consent

The default position in the field of bioethics is that informed consent must precede any medical treatment of, or research on, an individual. It would be a violation of patients' human rights for them to be actively misled about what medical problems they have or how medical professionals are responding to them. It would also objectionably infringe the human rights of participants in clinical trials if, say, they were not informed that they were part of a study and if their intimate behavior were monitored without their awareness.

These rights do not appear to be a function of vitality, understood as liveliness or creative power. If a medical professional believed that a given treatment would be most effective for curing a patient, then her consent would be irrelevant from the standpoint of a demand to respect her as a living being. This would be especially true if the medical professional believed that the treatment would be somewhat less effective if the patient knew why and how she were being treated. Similar remarks apply to unwitting participants in clinical trials. If keeping them in the dark about the study were the most effective way of

discovering new knowledge that would be useful in preventing or curing disease, then it seems that vitality would not be degraded.

The natural reply, here, is to say that the individual's liveliness would be gravely impaired upon finding out that she had not been informed of the medical intervention conducted on her. If patients discovered that their physicians had not told them of their treatments, they would be less likely to adhere to the required regimen and hence would tend not to become as healthy. Furthermore, both patients and participants would feel violated upon discovering the lack of truth telling on the part of healthcare workers, and such a violation of trust could be expected to reduce a person's exuberance, ► [self-esteem](#), and willingness to engage with her fellows gregariously.

Note that the logic of this reply suggests that what constitutes the violation of the human right would be the failure to keep secret the lack of informed consent. Vitality would be impaired only upon the patient's or participant's awareness that medical professionals had not fully informed him of the nature of the intervention; it would not be the lack of informed consent per se that would be the culprit.

A more complete explanation of this right, therefore, would appeal not merely to the expected consequences of failing to provide informed consent, but also the nature of this behavior "in itself." There is something degrading, e.g., about studying a person's bodily functions without her being aware of it, a judgment the community conception of dignity can underwrite. According to this perspective, the patient's or participant's capacity for friendly relationship would be degraded by such unfriendly behavior. One cannot genuinely *share* a life with others when they are unclear about the basic terms of one's interaction with them. Communal or friendly relationships, of the morally attractive sort that include joint projects, require not only transparency between actors about their goals, but also willingness on the part of each to achieve them. Hence, free and informed consent is normally to be expected prior to remedying or experimenting as a way to respect people's dignity as beings capable of community.

This entry has articulated two major conceptions of dignity that are informed by ideas salient in sub-Saharan moral thought, the vitality and community theories, and has applied them to three key human rights relating to freedom of movement, political participation, and informed consent. On the face of it, the Kantian, autonomy-based account of dignity appears able to capture these rights; upholding them is naturally understood in terms of respecting individuals' ability to govern themselves. Is that more Western account stronger than the more African ones proposed here? Are there intuitive human rights that the sub-Saharan conceptions can capture (say, about the importance of family or culture) and that the Western one cannot, or vice versa? Those who believe in human rights as grounded on human dignity have some interesting cross-cultural exploration to undertake. (Note that much of this entry is taken from Thaddeus Metz, African conceptions of human dignity. *Human Rights Review* 2012, 13: 19–37).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Asian Versus Western Views](#)
- ▶ [Communitarianism](#)
- ▶ [Harmony](#)
- ▶ [Love](#)
- ▶ [Measures of Social Cohesion](#)
- ▶ [Relational Wellbeing](#)
- ▶ [Social Values and Good Living](#)
- ▶ [Ubuntu: The Good Life](#)
- ▶ [United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)

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