

‘African Philosophy and Rights’

Invitation to contribute to the Special issue of *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*.

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Motivation

African philosophers have been at pains to give a philosophically robust or even plausible conception of Afro-communitarianism. One of the central issues that characterize this debate concerns determining the place of rights in Afro-communitarianism. This debate was kick-started by Ifeanyi Menkiti (1984) who remarked that rights are secondary in Afro-communitarianism. He never quite clarified and defended this position, and the literature never took him up on this particular issue, but this suggestion implied that rights somehow figure in Afro-communitarianism. Kwame Gyekye (1992) subsequently defended what he considered to be a moderate view of Afro-communitarianism, which balances rights and duties as enjoying the same moral status. Gyekye, in his later works, appears to reject a rights-oriented society (Gyekye, 2004). Most debates about rights in African philosophy have been strongly influenced by Menkiti and Gyekye.

Some of the major limitations of this debate are that it has not asked deep philosophical questions about the place of rights in African philosophy. For example, Menkiti simply states that rights have a secondary status in African philosophy; and, Gyekye has argued that they are fundamental as much as duties are. But none of these scholars have told us how they understand rights both as ontological and moral properties. Even those scholars who critique Menkiti and Gyekye assume that it is obvious what rights are and what their functions are in a political theory informed by African thought, particularly in its decolonial mode (Matolino, 2009; Famanikwa, 2010). These concerns about rights in African philosophy are even more pressing in Afro-communitarianism for several reasons that have largely been ignored in the literature.

Firstly, Western communitarians tend to distance themselves from rights (Sandel, 1982). Some communitarians have even gone further to label rights as a ‘fiction’ or an ‘invention’ of the enlightenment project (MacIntyre, 1982). One immediately wonders why

African scholars have not explained, unlike other communitarian traditions elsewhere, their commitments to rights, even if they are of secondary importance. Secondly, Western scholars who espouse the idea of rights differ on how to understand them and their function (Donnelly, 1982; Gerwith, 1984; Sen, 2004; Tasioulas, 2012). This raises questions about (1) the fundamental nature of rights, (2) the philosophical justification of rights and (3) the function of rights in Afro-communitarianism. And, there is a pressing concern that those who are sceptical about rights in Afro-communitarianism state their case.

This special issue of the *Theoria* invites multi-and-interdisciplinary contributions on questions about rights in the light of characteristically African values. Submissions should focus preferably but not exclusively on African philosophy, African studies and their contributions on rights. Submissions should largely be theoretical rather than empirical. Submissions on the following topics, among others, are particularly welcome:

- What is the nature and character of the concept of rights influenced by African axiological resources?
- Do rights have to feature as part of a plausible conception of Afro-communitarianism?
- What are the implications of the normative idea of personhood for the idea of rights?
- Are rights strictly a Western concept/value?
- Is there an African philosophical paradigm of rights?
- What philosophical foundations could be offered to justify rights from an African perspective? Are rights ‘natural’? Are they ‘cultural’? Or, they just a ‘fiction’?
- Are rights ‘universal’ or ‘relative’?
- What contributions can African philosophy contribute to the global discourse of rights?
- Should African philosophy concern itself with the idea of rights at all?

Submission date for manuscript to undergo the review process is: 15 Feb 2018. For submission: <http://ojs.berghahnjournals.com/index.php/theoria/about/submissions>. For style guide: <http://journals.berghahnbooks.com/theoria/info-for-authors/>.

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