

CULTURE, RELIGION AND ABLEISM

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of ableism and the influence of religion and culture on ableism. The word ableism is not commonly used in this part of the globe. However, the concept is prevalent in the African society. Ableism is discrimination against those living with disabilities. They are not basically recognized and accorded respect, rights and privileges due to them. This form of oppression against the disable reduces them most times to inferior class and makes them look less human. People could be deformed and disabled mentally, psychologically, physically etc. and still fill a gap in the development of the society. Some people who are naturally endowed and talented who happen to be disabled are restrained from putting to full use their God given talents. It is very unfortunate when our religious beliefs hamper on our relationship with people instead of fostering good relationships. Most people who claim to be religious see the disabled as cursed or suffering as a result of their sin or the sin of their ancestors. In some religious organizations, they are subjected to unfair treatments like compulsory fasting, penance, deliverance and other forms of coerced activities. This paper proffers solutions to harmful religious beliefs and cultural practices regarding the disabled. The author recommends that the religious leaders, traditional rulers and the government should create awareness and conscientize people on the implications of ableism in the society. The paper concludes that there should be prohibition of all forms of discrimination on the ground of disability.

Keywords: Ableism, Disability, Discrimination, Stigma

Introduction

The word ableism which is a form of discrimination like racism and sexism is not commonly used in the African context. The term ableism according to Wolbring (2012) was first used as a medium to advocate for human rights by the disability rights movements in the United States and Britain to serve as an analytic parallel to sexism and racism for those studying disability as social creation. Ableism manifests in our cultural beliefs and religious practices. It is our attitude towards

the disabled around us. The term ableism has these connotations: discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities as inferior to those who are not disabled. In some cases, it is also seen as related to ablism, disablism, anapirophobia, anapirism, and disability discrimination according to Linson, S. and Berube, M. (1998). Ableism is a set of stereotypes and practices that devalue and discriminate against people with disabilities according to an online article, *What is Ableism? Disability and Philanthropy Forum*, (2021). It is described as discrimination in favor of able-bodied people. There are some conceptions about ableism that really captivated the attention of the researcher in this paper. These definitions well explain what ableism is from the worldview of the disabled. Michael (2020, p.2) quotes Maria Palacious poem (2017) on naming ableism. Part of this poem reads:

Ableism is how you want to lock us in the closet and how you believe that giving us new labels like physically challenged and differently abled is no longer labeling us ...

Ableism is our story told by nondisabled voices captured through a nondisabled lens ...

Ableism is painting our lives like a tragic story ...

Ableism is our story told by nondisabled voices captured through a nondisabled lens ...

Ableism is you feeling like I should be grateful for the ramps and the parking spaces as if access was not a basic right ...

Ableism is when you force unsolicited help upon me because, to you, it seemed like I needed it ...

Ableism is you thinking that my asking for help gives you the right to decide for me ...

Ableism is when you wish for a world without disabled people, and you say that to me and expect me to agree with you ...

Ableism is when you say that if you became disabled, you would want to die ...

Ableism is wishing you could help us die, or wishing you didn't have to help us live ...

Ableism is believing disabled people are better off dead ...

(Selections from “Naming Ableism” by Maria Palacios 2017. Full poem on pp. 34–36).

The above definitions depict the various perceptions people have concerning the disabled which are termed ableism informed by cultural and religious beliefs. Anyone can suffer from disability that is why it is important to treat the disabled with empathy.

There are different forms of ableism such as personal ableism, system or institutional ableism. Personal ableism is defined as feeling instinctively uncomfortable around disabled people or anyone who seems strange in ways that might be connected to a disability of some kind. This manifests in hundred ways and can include being nervous, clumsy and awkward around people in wheelchairs, being viscerally disgusted by people whose bodies appear to be very different or deformed and avoiding talking to disabled people in order to avoid some kind of feared embarrassment. System or institutional ableism can mean physical barriers, policies, laws, regulations and practices that do not protect or include people with disabilities. Such policies and barriers that regulate the freedom and equality of people with disabilities (Osmanski, 2021).

Africans who are disabled are not given equal rights and opportunities. Culture and religious beliefs have contributed to ableism unconsciously. There are too many people that are disabled who can work but are unemployed. The African society rather sees them as liability when they can actually contribute meaningfully to the society. Parents of the disabled in some cases encourage them to be begging on the streets.

The Concepts of Culture and Religion

There are divergent views concerning the concept of religion in terms of definition. The common perspective of scholars concerning religion is that it is a social institution because it was created by man. You cannot talk about religion and leave culture. They both work hand in glove. Culture can be defined as a way in which a particular people do things, sees things which also include their belief and language which is being passed on from one generation to another. Culture like religion was created by man. It is the wholistic way of a people’s life. Culture and religion are two parts of a society that are interlocked in conceptual, functional

and analytic issues that throw them open to various definitions and perceptions. B. O. Ukeje (1979) defines culture as “the fabric of ideas, beliefs, skills, tools, aesthetic objects, methods of thinking, of eating, and of talking, as well as customs, and institutions into which each member of the society is born.” This means that you cannot separate a man from his culture. Culture affects virtually every area of a man’s life. Morrish (1974) describes culture as a complex whole which include knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society.

Religion elevates cultural values to the position of ultimate concerns. Religion gives shape to culture. Emily Durkheim (1912) in his work on *The Elementary Form of the Religious Life*, a work which was first published in 1912 and translated by Joseph Swain defines culture as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (p.201). It is the self-validation of a society by means of myth and ritual. Religion forms the basic ways in which cultures and individuals imagine how things are and what they mean. Religion like culture according to O’Dea (1966) is a symbolic transformation of experience. In the light of these definitions on culture and religion, one could see that the African man’s religion is embedded in his culture. Naturally, the African sees disability as a misfortune and a curse. This influences the way he also relates with a physically challenged or mentally challenged person. In some culture some decades ago in Africa, the disabled of some sort were thrown into the evil forest.

Challenges Associated with Disability in Africa

In all religions and cultures of the world, persons with disabilities face various challenges which may vary from one region or location to another. Disability could be physical, emotional or psychological. In the Igbo culture, people with disabilities such as; hunch-back, albinism, cripple, blindness, deaf and dumb, imbecility, down syndrome etc are often marginalized. People suffering from albilinsm are always stigmatized. They are called all sorts of names in Igbo language that are derogatory such as “anyari” which means, albino “bekee or oyibo” which implies white person. In some cases, people call them by these names neglecting the original names given to them by their parents. They are treated as inferior persons most times in institutions of learning, in the Church and even in the work place. They are treated with low expectation and prejudice as the weak and fragile. The experience of persons with albinism and stories heard

around us show that they face serious threats to their life and health in many communities. The experiences of discrimination as well as cases of persons being killed for the purpose of harvesting their body organs for rituals associated with superstition and witchcraft practices are no longer uncommon. Hunch-back is associated with superstitions which make one with the challenge very vulnerable. In some African localities, they are hunted for ritual killings, sacrifices and other fetish practices. Generally, the disabled suffer marginalization and discrimination from the able-bodied. The height of this oppression is bullying the young ones in school and exposing them to all forms of molestation.

The *Toolkit on Disability for Africa (2021)* by the United Nations reveals that;

Negative attitudes about disability impact on all aspects of the lives of persons with disabilities, including the ability to access education, to participate in non-exploitative work, to live where and with whom one chooses, to marry and start a family, and to move about freely within the community. Different groups or individuals may have beliefs about disability that vary from those held by wider society and beliefs may vary even within small communities and within families. In African societies, disability is sometimes also associated with negative perceptions resulting in stigma, discrimination, exclusion and violence, as well as other forms of abuse of persons with disabilities. (Toolkit on Disability for Africa: Cultures, Beliefs and Disability by Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, p.3)

Some people believe that disability is a curse which affects the way the disabled are treated in some communities such as indulging in sorcery to discover the cause of misfortune of disability. In some cases, mentally and physically challenged people are not well taken care of by families as a result of shame. They are in some cases taken to deliverance and healing centers for cure which may even be against their wish. Treatments given to them in such healing centers are not always favorable. They can be flogged, beaten and or face other forms of maltreatments in the name of deliverance. Some people suffering from disability have been accused of witchcraft because they are suffering from a sickness they cannot help themselves out from.

Stigma

Persons who are disabled and their families suffer from stigma most times because of the way the society interprets their challenge. Stigma can be defined as an attribute possessed by a person or group that is regarded as undesirable or discrediting. The disabled are most times treated as outcast. Stigma is degenerating. It makes problems worse and disabilities difficult to heal. Hence for persons with disabilities and their families, stigma often results in a lowering of status within the community according to *Mental Health Foundation* (Stigma and Discrimination, mentalhealth.org.uk, retrieved on January 1, 2022).

Low Self Esteem

Ableism can lead those suffering from disability to unhealthy self-esteem. Low self-esteem is lack of confidence in oneself and a sense of worthlessness and hopelessness. Chukwuedo (2015) states that low self-esteem makes one to continually compare himself with those around him, highlight his inequalities, feel negative about how he lives and lose sight of the value of his individuality. Low self-esteem gives one a sense of inadequacy and dissatisfaction. The problem of ableism makes the disabled feel worthless and hopeless in life because people tend to see them that way. Bogart (2014) says that several studies have found correlations between impairment factors and wellbeing, suggesting that people with acquired impairments have lower life satisfaction than those who were born with their impairments. On the other hand, people with less visible impairments have lower self-esteem than those with more visible impairments (Goodrich and Ramsey, 2013).

To overcome the sense of worthlessness which nature, fate, culture or religion puts one into, one should stop comparing himself with others. Accept your strengths and weaknesses. Feel more confident in your own thought. Make realistic planning. These can help to boost one's self esteem.

Discrimination

Discrimination is treating a person disfavouredly. Merriam-webster Dictionary (2022) defines discrimination as the unfair treatment of a person or group of people differently from other people or groups of people. Discrimination can be on the ground of the following: sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation, age etc. Discrimination on the basis

of disability is defined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as any distinction, exclusion or restriction based on disability which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal basis with others, of all human rights.

Darling and Heckert (2010) say that discrimination against disabled people is perceived as unfortunate but inevitable. As a result of ableism, persons with disabilities may face exclusion and dehumanizing treatment in all areas of their lives - including work-places, health-care services and educational institutions. At the individual level, stigma and discrimination against persons with disabilities can also result in internalized oppression and feelings of shame. When confronting stigma on a regular basis, persons with disabilities may face great challenges in overcoming the negative views of their religion and culture to achieve self-acceptance and a sense of pride in their lives. In this way, when stigma is internalized by persons with disabilities, it creates yet another challenge that must be overcome.

Cultural and religious beliefs about the disabled create feelings of shame among families who may hide their child with a disability from public view. Sometimes those who take care of the disabled forbid them to take part in social activities owing to stigma or in order to protect them from perceptions and stigmas. In some instances, as a result of misguided beliefs, children with disabilities are not permitted to attend school, an article on *Stigma is Toughest Foe in Epilepsy Fight* in New York Times by Baruchin (2011) reveals. For example, fear and ignorance about the causes of epilepsy can result in exclusion from school for children with seizure disorders. In most cases in Africa, persons who are deaf, dumb, lame, imbecile etc. are considered incapable of pursuing an education. Children whose parents have disabilities may also experience stigma on this basis. The maltreatments of the disabled in the society can lead to suicidal thoughts. It is very disheartening when children go through discrimination on conditions they did not contribute to. Some people who have mental problem have lost their lives through beating, flogging and stoning by unscrupulous persons. This is the reason some families hide their child who is disable to save him from harm or death.

Implications of Culture and Religion on Disability

False and harmful beliefs about disability can have implications for all aspects of the lives of persons with disabilities and their families. It is pertinent to discuss some of the ways in which religious and cultural beliefs can impede the ability of

persons with disabilities to enjoy their fundamental rights and freedoms, and to participate in society and development on an equal basis with others.

In the *Toolkit on Disability for Africa (2021)*, experience and observations show that at family and community levels, isolation, shunning, and avoidance of contact frequently occur with persons with disabilities. In some instances, persons with disabilities and their families are sent away from their communities. In others, for example, persons with disabilities are, at the time of their death, denied traditional funeral rites. In some cases, persons with disabilities are subjected to physical violence and assault as a result of stigma and harmful beliefs. There are many examples of people who claim to be able to provide treatments and remedies to “cure” certain types of disability. Some of these treatments are rooted in local custom while others are provided in conventional biomedical settings, with harmful consequences for the health, life and dignity of persons with disabilities.

About epilepsy, some people believe that it is contagious and that those who have it are possessed by demonic powers. Attempts to cure persons of epilepsy have included the erroneous belief that consumption of kerosene and certain concoction can bring cure. This assumption has led some people to force it into the mouths of the epileptic during epileptic attack.

In a report issued in October 2012, *Human Rights Watch* documented the situation of thousands of people with mental disabilities in Ghana who are forced to live in psychiatric institutions and spiritual healing centres, often against their will and with little possibility of challenging their confinement. In psychiatric hospitals people with mental disabilities face overcrowding and unsanitary conditions. In some of the spiritual healing centres, known as “prayer camps,” persons with mental disabilities were found chained to trees, frequently in the baking sun, and forced to fast for weeks as part of a “healing process,” while being denied access to medication. In some cases, they are flogged as a way of driving out the demons responsible for the sickness.

In African Traditional Religion, it is believed that a person’s sin in his past life can affect him in his present life. Some people are suffering from disability as a result of accident they encountered or the abomination they committed in their past life. Such persons suffer the consequences of these incidents when they possibly reincarnate. To avert or solve such evils, certain rituals are carried out.

Measures to Fight Harmful Cultural Beliefs and Religious Practices regarding Disability

This paper has presented a number of causes and consequences of harmful beliefs about disability. Although these may differ substantially according to particular religious inclinations or cultural contexts, there are a variety of measures that governments, national human rights institutions, religious and traditional rulers and other stakeholders can take to address the impact of those beliefs on the lives of persons with disabilities.

These measures, as suggested in module 13 in the *Toolkit for Disability in Africa* (2021) on the topic, Culture, Beliefs and Disability include:

- (1) empowering persons with disabilities;
- (2) developing community-based sensitization and education campaigns;
- (3) implementing school-based disability rights awareness programmes;
- (4) encouraging activism and documentation on human rights
- (5) undertaking law and policy reform efforts to combat stigma.

1. Empowering Persons with Disabilities

Exposure to stigma can often lead persons with disabilities to experience personal shame and internalization of negative beliefs, making it harder to feel pride in the many aspects of one's identity and to understand one as being equally entitled to all fundamental human rights, as well as inclusion in society and development. Individuals with disabilities ought to be included in everyday activities and ensuring they have access to resources and opportunities in ways that are similar to their non-disabled peers as stated in "Disability Inclusion" Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved 08/01/22.

In working to counter stigma, it is therefore imperative that efforts focus not just on broader society but also on persons with disabilities themselves. Support for the development of leadership skills for persons with disabilities is also critical, as leaders or self-advocates with disabilities can, through their work and participation, serve as role models of inclusion, helping other persons with disabilities to overcome internalized stigma and changing negative perceptions that may exist within communities. Prominent persons with disabilities can also play an important role in this regard. Indeed, across Africa persons with disabilities who are judges, parliamentarians, athletes, musicians, artistes, and

other familiar and respected public figures have taken part in disability awareness campaigns, enhancing their effectiveness and helping to dispel myths and combat stigma. The disabled who are privileged to have voices in the society can be a source of inspiration by speaking from their own experience and showing that people with disabilities can be inspirational role models.

2. Developing Community-based Sensitization and Education Campaigns

Very often, stigma and stereotyping connected with disability take on particular forms depending on the specific community context. As a result, in addition to national level campaigns it is also critical to address stigma and stereotyping at community level. Developing community-based disability sensitization and awareness programs, campaigns to combat the harmful effects of stigma and stereotyping should engage disabled people's organizations and community leaders and stakeholders.

Human rights education can also be an important tool for combating stigma and the resulting discrimination experienced by persons with disabilities. By developing national human rights education plans and by ensuring that human rights education takes place in schools, children can be reached at an early age. Disability rights awareness should be included in all such education programmes, which can also be used to address specific harmful beliefs that may be held within particular cultures.

Such education materials should be inclusive and available in accessible materials and through accessible approaches to teaching. The policies and practices of schools must also be in accordance with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. For example, instruction based on a human rights education plan will have little meaning if a school does not permit attendance of children with disabilities or if they are otherwise precluded from attending, for example owing to lack of accessible facilities or approaches to teaching. The traditional rulers should seek out disabled people in their communities. If community leaders will embrace the diversity of disabled people. It might encourage people to open up.

3. Implementing school-based disability rights awareness programmes

There should be school-based disability rights awareness programs which could be organized by the government, religious bodies or nongovernmental

organizations. Students should be educated on the consequences of ableism. Teachers as well are meant to understand the rights and privileges that should be given to the disabled instead of discriminating against them.

Nario-nedmond (2010, p.327) suggests ways to avoid ableism in activism. They are;

1. When organizing an event make sure it is accessible to those with mobility, sensory, or other impairments. Can people get around; are there interpreters for those who use sign language?
2. Don't ignore and or invalidate people with less visible impairments, or those who choose not to participate.
3. Avoid enforcing the use of academic jargon: "just because someone doesn't completely understand your words, doesn't mean they aren't as oppressed or revolutionary as you."

4) Encouraging activism and documentation on human rights

It is very important to avoid ableism in activism and documentation on human rights violations against persons with disabilities. Reporters can also play an important role in investigating and publicizing abuses experienced by persons with disabilities. There are many examples of documentation of stigma and harmful practices experienced by persons with disabilities as well as the resultant human rights abuses. Such efforts should be scaled up so that more people can benefit from them. To do so journalists themselves may need training in disability awareness and the rights of persons with disabilities.

(5) Undertaking law and policy reform efforts to combat stigma

The government should enact laws and policies that will be geared towards combating stigma. It is needful to create disability rights movements which will be involved in raising awareness against civil rights violations and educating the public that disabled people constituted a disadvantaged minority group that deserved legal protection against discrimination. Nario-Nedmond (2020) recommends that people can create change in the religious and cultural beliefs without protesting. The disabled can volunteer, attend public meetings, and write letters start conversation online or in person. When there are more disabled people in public service, the political situation can change and there will be more sensitization on the needs of the disabled and promote empowerment programs.

Conclusion

The way the disabled are maltreated do not bring about any progress and productivity in the society. Some people who are naturally endowed and talented who happen to be disabled are restrained from putting to full use their God given talents. The African culture and belief system subject these disabled brothers, sisters and neighbors to second class citizens. There should be no place for prejudice in the African culture and religion. The church should promote social change and disability justice. The pulpit should be used to change people's orientation about the disabled. They are created in God's image and are loved by the creator. Disability is not a curse and people who are born disabled or became disabled through accident or sickness can still function well in the society to bring about development. The disabled are an integral part of society, and as such, should not be segregated, isolated, or subjected to the effects of discrimination.

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