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Communal individualism: A critical analysis of the nature of African community

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Abstract

An African community appears to function in the same way that an individual functions in the (post)modern West. It differs from an understanding of *ubuntu* and an African community as universal. This article diverges from the universalised concept of *ubuntu* in that it points out that the rural understanding of a community in Africa is more local than universal. The explored literature seems to support the rural understanding of an African community as more local and exclusive than universal and inclusive. Blood relationships and shared practices define this particularised identity. The article, therefore, recommends that the individual concept of an African community would be universalised only when it is applied to Christianity as a universal community of believers united by the blood of Jesus.

Keywords

African community; ubuntu; communal individuality; ritual; Christianity

Introduction

The concept of a community in Africa resembles that of an individual in the West. This "communal individualism" appears strange to most Westerners. This came to my attention during a conference hosted by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria (6–7 June 2023). The conference brought scholars together from different parts of the world to reflect on evangelism in Southern Africa. In one keynote presentation "Decolonising evangelism in South Africa", Klippies Kritzinger argued that the history of colonialism is making evangelism increasingly difficult in South Africa.

During ensuing discussions, Michael Bhiel from the University of Hamburg in Germany wondered why white South Africans today are still held responsible for what was done by their ancestors even when they are no longer part of it. My response was that Africans usually hold a contemporary community responsible for an offence committed in the past until something is done to restore relationships. White participants of the conference were surprised by my statement, black participants were not. The latter were not surprised because they knew from experience that Africans consider a community as one body. Because of this, "an offence committed by one individual could have far-reaching consequences on all members of the community" (Mafumbate 2019:10). All able members of a clan or a community, for example, pay blood compensation[1] for a murder committed by one of its members.

Even stranger to white participants was the idea that African communities mostly operate like individuals. Kritzinger admitted that he had never thought about the concept of communities behaving like individuals and pointed out that *ubuntu*, the principle commonly referred to as underlying African communities, has always been explained as implying a universal understanding of community. This can be seen in the popular argument that "ubuntu embraces every human being, all races, and nations–uniting them into a new universal 'Familyhood' – where individuals, families, communities and nations would discover the vital fact that: they are an integral part(s) of each other (sic)" (Nolte-Schamm 2006:371). This view of *ubuntu* as indicating a global community is held by most scholars, but also by politicians and theologians. Kritzinger suggested that more research is needed on the different understandings of the concept of "African community" and their impact, a suggestion to which this article is one response. For it, I draw from my doctoral dissertation that explores what I call a "central value system" and its influence on decision-making. What people learn in their respective communities, according to the central value system concept, shapes the ways they make decisions. Thus, if African communities act like individuals (according to "communal

1 Blood compensation refers to cattle, money or any other compensation that is paid when a person has been killed. The community or clan of a person who killed pays blood compensation to the community in which a person was killed. The compensation is given to the family of a murdered person after the community or clan receives it.

individualism"), how do they then relate among themselves in ways that resemble how individuals relate to one another in the West?

There seems to be no literature exploring the concept of communal individualism in the African context. However, the Scottish American philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre comes somewhat closer to the idea of communal individualism in his famous, *After Virtue*. MacIntyre never refers to it as such, but in *After Virtue* it implies that a "primary bond is a shared understanding both of the good for man (sic) and of the good of that community and where individuals identify their primary interests with reference to those goods" (MacIntrye 2007:150). Some African scholars have substituted the concept of an African community with the philosophy or principle of *ubuntu* in the sense that the concept implies that Africans share and subscribe to the notion of a global community. Mbiti (1969) was one of the African thinkers who seemed to believe that *ubuntu* implies inclusivity of all communities. It was partly for this point that Tutu (1979) was not impressed with Mbiti and his theology of *ubuntu* (Gathogo 2022). I assert that in reality a concept of universal *ubuntu* may be challenged; the real idea of a community in Africa refers to something more local than universal.

African communities are mostly based on a particularised identity. Blood relationships and shared practices define this particularised identity. Shared practices include rituals, dance, and language, among others. Especially for Africans not yet influenced by Western concepts, a community produces individuals, not the other way around. Furthermore, relationships within a community in Africa are valued more than relationships between different communities. Communities in Africa are nothing more than extended individuals. If so, then how does one balance this view without encouraging intolerance? This question will be addressed at the end of the article. Now, however, a more detailed understanding of *ubuntu* in Africa serves as a point of departure.

Ubuntu and the African community

Understanding something is mostly regarded as part of a solution to any problem related to such a thing. Therefore, understanding the nature of

an African community may improve strained human relationships within African communities – especially those in mixed racial societies such as those in South Africa. These communities are combinations of racial groups with some including "Westernised" as well as "more traditional" Africans. Their relationships may be strained by concepts originating from their communities of origin and, in turn, by how different groups understand *ubuntu*. Differing understandings of *ubuntu* can, for one, according to Meiring (2015:3), in the long run, strain relationships between different communities because "the appeal to fellow humanity can serve as a social lubricant in real situations of conflict which could then obscure real divisions based on class, language, gender, ethnicity, bodily appearances, as well as religious and political affiliations." However, if mixed societies understand the *ubuntu* concept as proposed in this essay, they may improve relationships and these may translate into better relationships among communities in other parts of Africa. This section, therefore, explores the *ubuntu* philosophy about the concept of an African community. The aim is to understand whether *ubuntu* implies a universal link among all human beings and their communities.

It is important to remember that Africans and their communities are not at all homogenous. To begin with, there are four main different groups in Africa according to the families of languages they speak. They are "the *Niger-Congo* group or Bantu languages, the *Nilo-Saharan* group (spoken mostly by pastoralists groups like the Maasai), *Afro-Asiatic* languages, used particularly in Ethiopia & North Africa, and the *Khoisan* spoken mostly by the San (or Bushmen) of South Africa" (Gichure 2015:118). Interestingly, most of these groups share one understanding of what a community is. It is easy to see in East Africa where all four of the language groups are represented. The Bantu, from whose language the term *ubuntu* originates, are found across Africa except in Northern Africa. Many of the Bantu language speakers are found in regions on the continent where they are/have been most exposed to Western concepts. The latter may be one of the reasons why the *ubuntu* concept is understood differently in different African communities.

Linked to the above differences, in Africa, a concept may be understood in its more traditional meaning in rural settings, i.e., where people have (had) less exposure to the world beyond it. In East Africa, the *ubuntu*

concept, too, seems different to its Southern African meaning than in parts of East Africa less exposed to the outside world. It is also my contention that exposure to external concepts resulted in some equating *ubuntu* with humanity rather than with humanness. In the case of humanity, *ubuntu* implies human rights. However, *ubuntu* as humanness rather implies substance that underlies a community (Biar 2022). It is this idea of *ubuntu* as humanity that led some scholars to believe that it refers to a global community. Most often, those who regard *ubuntu* as humanity are those who subscribe to Western concepts of human rights and human dignity in ways that may appear strange to rural Africans. South African scholar Jacob Meiring (2015:2–3) thus argues that "*ubuntu* is a globalised construct by southern African intellectual elite (politicians, academics, theologians and managers) and that it is deeply disconnected from any original or authentic contemporary form of village life and worldview … on precolonial rural life." Until fairly recently traditional Africans never entertained the concept of universal rights. What they had was the concept of a communal duty rather than the rights of individuals. This communal duty was a requisite within each community. The duty towards outsiders was mostly one of hospitality rather than one based on the humanity of the outsider. Hospitality was shown as a mere act of kindness towards one's visitors.

Many Southern African scholars hold a concept of *ubuntu* as based on one's humanity because of their Westernised context. However, there are also Southern African scholars with an alternative understanding of what *ubuntu* is in rural Africa. Forster (2010) and Ramose (2017), for instance, understand *ubuntu* as humanness rather than humanity. They agree with some scholars in East Africa who do so as well. Christine Wanjiru Gichure is a Kenyan scholar stating that "[f]or the Kikuyu of Kenya the word "mundu", *mundu* means human being, while "umundu" means the humanness in human being. Similarly, the Meru, also of Kenya say "muntu" and "imuntu" respectively, to render the human and humanness" (Gichure 2015:119). For this reason and in theological terminology, according to Biar (2022:297), "[a] community in the ethics of *ubuntu* is the source of individual identity in the same way that the substance of God is the source of the three hypostases in the Trinitarian God."

Gichure's observation above is important in that it captures the African concept of community in many Bantu language speaking parts of the continent. And, as was said earlier, some of these groups have had more exposure to the outside world while others have had less exposure. The Kikuyu, for example, may fall in the first category, since most of them reside in and around cities like Nairobi. The Meru represent communities less exposed to Western concepts. Still, both groups share the same concept of *ubuntu*. Other Bantu language speaking groups, whether exposed to outsiders or not, share a similar understanding of the ntu term: Mostly, "[t]he interesting thing regarding the Bantu phonological similarities is the concept of *ntu* as used in these cluster of languages" (Gichure 2015:118). *Ntu* indicates something that has particular qualities and it is the same for this group of speakers in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa. What the Kikuyu and the Meru people of Kenya mean by *ntu* is the same thing that applies to the Sukuma people of Tanzania, the Tsonga people of Malawi, the KiBobangi people of Central Africa and the KiBongo in Congo (cf. Gichure 2015:118).

Given the above-mentioned similarities of the term *ntu* among different groups in different parts of Africa, it implies that South African scholars who understand *ubuntu* as humanness are closer to the original concept of an African community as a unifying substance of some sort. As a unifying substance, the community is what produces individuals in Africa (Biar 2022). Because of this, Africans can only talk of diversity in unity rather than unity in diversity. It is not like the (post)modern Western understanding whereby individuals come together to form a community under some kind of social contract. It is in this concept that one can talk of unity in diversity. Scholars who claim that a philosophy of unity in diversity exists in Africa likely employ the Western concept of social contract rather than the African concept of *ubuntu* (cf. Nolte-Schamm 2006).

Furthermore, in a community believed to be formed by individuals who would come together under some form of social contract, an individual is more important than his/her community. This, however, is not the case in places where a community is believed to produce individuals. According to Mafumbate (2019:7), for example, "the community is the custodian of the individual; hence the individual has to go where the community goes." Therefore, a community operates like an individual in Africa. One

community is considered a single entity next to other communities in the same way that an individual is considered a single entity next to other individuals in the (post)modern West.

In African understanding, the way that a community produces individuals is that one man and one or more women produce their children, forming a nuclear family. Their children produce more children and thus an extended family is established. This goes on until the number of people reaches the level where they are called a community. This form of thinking has important benefits as the extended family that becomes a community guarantees "social security for the poor, old, widowed, and orphaned which is one of the most admired values in the traditional African socioeconomic arrangement" (Mafumbate 2019:8).

United by blood relationships, African communities are understandably more particular. Where blood relationships do not define a community, friendship and relationship by choice may apply and might be universalised. Yet, this universalisation could still be understood in terms of a family. It is along this line that religious groups that consider themselves as families or a community function well in Africa. *Ubuntu* probably can translate to a universal community in terms of religion in Africa. In other words, a Western understanding of *ubuntu* is easily made to refer to the universal nature of a religion in Africa.

All in all, *ubuntu* is the idea that an individual exists because other individuals in the community exist and one cannot survive alone in an African community. In traditional Africa, "security and its value depended on personal identification with and within the community" (Mafumbate 2019:8). Since the survival of individuals is linked to a community in Africa, neighbouring communities may sometimes pose a threat to the lives of individuals within each community. Therefore, each community has to consolidate itself as one entity against potential external threats. This is why "African communities" refer to separate, individual local communities rather than to a single, universal collection of communities. As such, friendship among communities in Africa becomes the only means of harmony among different individual communities. We now turn our attention to the possible importance of friendship and relationships within and among African communities.

Ubuntu and harmonious relationships

All societies share some social values. According to Columbus (2014:208), these values "refer to the ideas shared by members of a society as to what is good, right, and desirable; things worth striving for." As such, since harmonious relationships matter much in African communities, maintaining them is one of the social values that they strive for. As Nolte-Schamm (2006:379) points out, "African tradition focuses on social relationships, and the healing of broken relationships." Even though African communities are not universal, they still value friendly relationships among individual clans or tribes. It is believed that relationships among different clans or tribes is means to survival in the same way as individuals within one community survive by relying on one another. Since no individual wants to be isolated within a community, no community wants to be isolated from or by its neighbours. Yet, and this is an important proviso, relationships among communities in Africa have nothing to do with the concept of inclusivity across tribal divides. Such a concept is a postmodernist one.

Scholars who attempt to force *ubuntu* into fitting concepts of (post)modern traditions want to make people believe that it is inclusive (cf. Tutu 1999) when in reality African communities are far from inclusive across tribal divides (Taylor 1965). Inclusivity is generally realised within an individual community. In other words, each community in Africa belongs to itself and focuses on its own affairs. This is one of the reasons why tribalism remains prevalent on the continent. Thus, Nolte-Schamm (2006) rightly laments the exclusive nature of African communities. Yet, it remains what it is, especially in rural areas in Africa.

Some scholars think an African community should be presented differently from what it is, in ways preferable in Western terms, to make the continent "look better". This, I found to be the prevailing case in Southern Africa. It is as if those who still want to present African communities as exclusive entities feel ashamed to do so where communities' nature is already constructed in line with postmodern thoughts. After all, such communities may be labelled extremist and their views of *ubuntu* are thought to proclaim, "that humanness manifests itself only in the community, and that an individual disconnected (or expelled) from the community is nothing" (Nolte-Schamm 2006:378). Those who never want to be associated with such extreme and

exclusive views feel comfortable with a (re)constructed inclusive nature of *ubuntu* and African community. However, changing this exclusivity in the philosophy of *ubuntu* to make African communities look inclusive would rarely make shortcomings of communal individualism disappear. What matters is to understand clearly the exclusive individual nature of African communities together with how they unite in their individuality.

It is intentional relationships that bring individual African communities together. These relationships are nurtured and maintained purposefully by members of an individual community. This intentional maintaining and nurturing of relationships fits the concept of *ubuntu* as practised in rural areas in Africa. As Nolte-Schamm (2006:374) points out, "*ubuntu* is about practicing the skill of building and maintaining relationships." Those who disturb harmonious relationships among members of one community in traditional Africa are punished, if not disowned (Van Niekerk 1994). This is because Africans believe that "the society is a series of interrelationships in which each one contributes to the welfare and the stability of the community and avoids anything that is disruptive or harmful to the community's life" (Okoye, Ezeanya and Chukwuma 2018:10).

Furthermore, in many African communities, "people are adept in complying with the strict provisions of cultural taboos and norms in order to ensure peace and harmony in their relationship with each other" (Columbus 2014:210). Because of this, individuals in a community have no right to disturb communal values. Toeing the line of communal values is believed to maintain social order in African communities. Without this safeguarding of order, African communities could easily lose their communal individuality. Individual members may introduce values of their own and refuse to listen to others, but this is what postmodernism is like. Since every society has values that it strives for, Africans maintain the value of communal individualism even if practised unconsciously in towns where people are exposed to Western values. In rural areas it is practised intentionally where the general belief is in "maintaining social order than meeting individual interests" (Kibret 2015:1).

Whenever relationships among friendly communities are disturbed by one person in a particular community, then all able members of that community take it upon themselves to restore those broken relationships. It is along this

line that restorative justice is the common way of solving problems among communities in Africa (Biar 2022). Each person must pay attention to what maintains relationships among people within a community and among communities. Generally, "every member of the community is expected to act in ways that will enhance the good of the entire society" (Okoye, Ezeanya and Chukwuma 2018:10). It is, however, crucial to note here that "the entire society" refers to the individual community, not a universal community. This is because African communities behave like individuals.

When an offence is not addressed to restore relationships between two communities or among more than two communities in Africa, members of a community that committed an offence are held responsible for generations until such wrong has been addressed – even when those who committed the offence have long gone. Nobody may claim that an individual who committed the offence against another individual or a family in another clan or tribe was the only one at fault. They all know that it is the community that produces individuals. For that reason, a community is a body with individuals inside it. That is why communal accountability matters in Africa. It is because of this communal accountability that "community elders act as custodians of community values" (Biar 2022:241).

This focused on the question of why Africans hold accountable children (even greatgrandchildren) for offences committed by previous generations. It showed that relationships among African communities are crucial. Because of this, a community that acts like an individual and takes on itself the responsibility to restore relationships with those that they (or one of them) wronged. This restoration of relationships can be done by and to any generation in a community if the offence had a general effect on a community that was wronged. Other means such as apology may help, but they are rarely used in rural Africa as even compensation cannot always restore relationships and some traditional practices apply to some situations. These traditional practices often are religious. It is in this area that Christian practices may help in restoring broken relationships among African communities.

Rituals and the restoring of relationships in Africa

Africans value human life. Because of this, any problem that involves the death of people will keep communities apart for a long time. There are instances where members of communities that shed blood between them cannot eat together until some rituals have been performed to restore relationships that would involve eating together. For many Africans, "the inner stain caused by guilt can only be removed through religious public cleansing" (Ilomo 2021:162). Whenever a ritual is not performed to cleanse communities from the shedding of blood, an enmity remains between such communities for generations. Greatgrandchildren of people who shed blood cannot free themselves from the problem by claiming individual innocence. The crime is often considered communal. Intermarriage may even be affected by issues of bloodshed among communities. This section will, therefore, explore some of these rituals in traditional Africa.

Many Africans consider broken relationships within a community to be more serious than a relationship disturbed between communities. When ranking the severity of guilt, Africans believe that any offence committed against a family or a person within a clan is graver than an offence committed against a person in another clan within one tribe. Moreover, an offence committed against a person or a family within one's tribe is crueller than the one committed against a person in another tribe. An example is the Bena people of Tanzania who believe that "an offence against a non-family member does not make an offender feel guilty" (Ilomo 2021:163). This is because a bond from within one's community is stronger than the one outside of it.

A ritual that is performed to restore a broken relationship in African communities mainly "involves atonement or reconciliatory rites, confession of sin or reparation" (Ilomo 2021:163). Offences differ in intensity. For example, some offences may have been insults, others may have been fighting that never resulted in bloodshed while others may have led to bloodshed. Most conflicts in an African community relate to land ownership and power (Ateng, Nuhu and Musah 2022). Yet, most of the offences, however light they could be, disrupt social harmony and friendship among people. The only difference is the method of conflict resolution. Two people in a family or a clan would often meet and resolve their disagreement

without any mediator between them. In this sense, while some offences are resolved using normal mediation by friends, family or community elders, others require rituals for the restoration of the relationship between conflicting parties. Rituals that restore relationships among people within a community are often more relaxed, compared to rituals performed in restoring relationships between individual communities. A ritual needed within a family would involve eating meat together or drinking wine, using the same cup. In some communities like those of the Hehe of Tanzania, relatives "agree among themselves on the amount of the fine, which can be from one or two ox, sheep, or goats, with the addition of money, according to the seriousness of the offence committed" (Ilomo 2021:169).

Rituals are more relaxed within a family or an individual community because bonds between members make trust easy. It is the trust that guarantees adherence to an agreement among conflicting parties. Africans abhor the dishonouring of an agreement. It makes the conflict worse than if rituals had never been performed in the first place. Trust among communities is often weaker than trust within a community. More explicit and intensive rituals are the ones that guarantee the mending of broken relationships among communities with weaker trust among them. An example of this is in the Murle community of South Sudan where a spear is buried to guarantee that those involved in a conflict will never attack each other again. Any side that violates this ritual and attacks the other side would suffer losses as a result of the violation of the agreement. In some communities, an animal may be slaughtered and "eaten by all those present, first of all, by the newly reconciled" (Ilomo 2021:169). Such rituals of animal slaughtering and the sharing of meat by conflicting parties are common in South Sudan (Ashworth and Ryan 2013).

In most cases, blood compensation precedes rituals for restoring relationships in conflicts involving bloodshed. The land is believed to have been polluted by the blood of people killed (Pendle 2020). This is what the Nuer people in South Sudan refer to as nueer. For them, "*[n]ueer* is a potentially lethal pollution that arises after the transgression of divinely sanctioned prohibitions, such as killing" (Pendle 2020:44). The Nuer share the same belief with the Kinga people of Tanzania that pollution that results from breaking of taboos "affects not only the individual concerned, but the whole community" (Ilomo 2021:164).

It is clear here that Africans value relationships both within and among communities. These relationships are important for mutual survival. It is the same need for survival that Africans want to avoid practices that pollute their land. The blood of other humans, regardless of their affiliations should not be shed. The shedding of blood within one community is even graver than the shedding of blood in another community. Because of this, equating Christianity with an African community would be more effective in promoting relationships and preventing killing among different communities and tribal groups than the mere construction of ubuntu as meaning a global community. Possibly, while Christianity prohibits the killing of any human being, the fact that Christianity constitutes communities, local and in the sense of neighbouring communities, the killing of one's own is linked to explicit relationships and breaking these relationships is even worse. We now turn our attention to Ubuntu in a Christian community.

Ubuntu and the universal Christian community

Religions that refer to themselves as communities seem to function well in Asia and Africa where a community is valued in the same way as an individual is valued in the (post)modern West. Islam is one of the religions that refer to themselves as one *umma* or a Muslim community (Sookhdeo 2014). Because of this understanding of who they are, Muslims often refer to one another as a brother and a sister. They also make sure that each member of their (Muslim) community who is suffering financially is assisted to better his or her life. They habitually would, for example, raise funds to help such a person to start a business. Muslims who move to a new geographical area for *dawa* (Islamic mission) marry into such communities and form their own Muslim communities. Whenever Muslim individuals see themselves scattered among non-Muslim communities, they move to one place to consolidate their community. They visit one another regularly to make sure that they know how each one of them is doing.

The understanding of religion as a global family, constituted by individual Muslim communities, in Islam seems to be missing in many Christian denominations. Yet, some Christian denominations are possible exceptions to this. Those Christian denominations that understand themselves in

terms similar to that of an African community (as explained above) naturally seem to function well in Africa in the same way that Muslims who behave like a community function. Born Again churches are part of churches that refer to themselves as a community. They refer to their members as brothers and sisters. One of their maxims is that the suffering of one person in their church community is the suffering of all members of that church. Clearly, they understand the traits that make an African community what it is, as explained above. This section discusses some of these traits in an attempt to understand how they fit the concept of *ubuntu*, specifically about Christianity.

Since *ubuntu* emphasizes communal dependence, Christian families may use the same idea to help African communities that consider themselves individuals to see themselves in religion as universal communities. Their maxims should be that I am one Christian because we are a global community of believers. Generally, the church "must be understood as the living community to bring about new hope in the world" (Verster 2022:59). So where does the individualism and exclusive nature of African communities fit in? Denominations within the universal Christian community should be regarded as individual families within an individual African community. We are blood relatives through the blood of Jesus Christ. Whatever offence each one of us commits against another should be considered as compensated by the blood of Jesus Christ. Actions among members of Christian families within a Christian community should resemble actions among individual families within an African community.

One of the ways in which individuals within an African community act is by caring for one another as a brother or sister. Africans care for one another within a community without attaching strings to such care. Conditional care is often frowned upon in Africa because it is considered not coming from the sincere and hospitable hearts of those providing it. Visitors in Africa may seldom give prior notice of their visits, but they still receive the hospitable care that they need from their hosts. These kinds of visits develop trust among people, not only within a family but also among communities. A visitor in traditional Africa never steals anything from his or her host. Therefore, hosts have no reason to be suspicious of their visitors even if such visitors are strangers. Hospitality "is one of the few facets of ancient African culture that is still intact and strongly practised today by

most Africans in spite of the forces of recent external influence or even internal pressure" (Mafumbate 2019:8). Members of a Christian global community should care for one another without attaching strings if they are to resemble members of individual African communities. A successful Christian community must "be the servant church, humbly following Christ as a Servant in the world" (Verster 2022:59).

Christians, like traditional Africans, may function well if they commit themselves to one another in services and harmonious relationships. Friendly interactions in rural African communities involve regular visits to one another in the same way that Muslims interact in their *umma* or global Muslim community. This was what Christian apartheid in South Africa missed, leading to hostilities. Lack of interaction among families and communities in Africa is always a sign of hostility. Today, South Africans believe that they have put behind them the era of apartheid. However, if churches are still divided along racial and class lines, then the sense of Christian community will not be as universal as some people would like *ubuntu* to be.

In their interactions, members within individual African communities give one another advice with a view to the common good of all individuals within the community. Many Africans believe that any wrong one member does bring shame and may even destroy the community as a whole. Generally, "[s]hame in Africa involves public humiliation if the act that created the violation was offensive to the public in a major way" (Ilomo 2021:167). This is why Africans advise one another regularly on what to do and what not to do in a community. A Christian community should do the same if it is to be a true, thriving community in Africa. Those who want to promote postmodern values according to which individuals always decide what is best for themselves, disregarding advice from elders and friends, will soon be disappointed. Africans who disregard such guidance as individuals will soon start refusing advice as a group of individuals. When these groups of individuals refuse advice along tribal lines, then tribal and racial minorities may suffer discrimination in rigid environments.

This section shows that a way in which *ubuntu* can ultimately become universal is to "Christianise" it. A universal Christian community, I think, can make sense to Africans in rural areas in many ways. They

can see one another as brothers and sisters in the same way they regard themselves in particular African communities. The care that Christians can provide to one another may translate to care that Africans experience in their communities. This would bring the sense of *ubuntu* of communal dependence to reality. The section also shows that regular visits among members of African communities are what keeps the bonds between them strong. A universal Christian community may benefit from the same idea of regular interactions among people of different races and social statuses. The other one is friendly advice that makes Africans avoid wrongs.

Conclusion

This article aims to show that an African community functions like an individual. The idea that *ubuntu* philosophy demonstrates the universal nature of an African community seems to be a construct of scholars or academics, politicians, and religious leaders. In the explored literature, those who discuss the traditional understanding of an African community, not influenced by academic and Western ideas, have little support for the universalisation of *ubuntu*. There is also a difference between those who connect an African community to individual rights and the ones who connect it to a substance that underlies it. The universalisation of *ubuntu* comes from its understanding as based on humanity, while collective individuality relates to its concept of humanness. I agree with scholars who understand *ubuntu* as humanness, not humanity.

Humanity is the (post)modern concept connected to individual rights. Humanness is the premodern concept connected to the substance that makes humans who they are. It is an essence underlying human. Africans are mostly neither modernist nor postmodernist in their beliefs. Since humanness is a substance that makes humans who they are, it is also what makes an African community what it is. An African community is like a substance because it is what produces individuals, not the other way around. Although humanness undoubtedly refers to the substance underlying all humans in the world, the formation of an African community makes it more particular than universal. The only way that an African community can be universalised, I believe, is to translate the same understanding to a Christian family and then to a universal Christian community.

Relationships among religious communities can be by extension in the same manner it is done from an individual community to a nation. The universal Christian community would still be individual in comparison to other religious communities. However, it will be a community of different racial groups united by the blood of Jesus Christ.

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