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# Communal Living in African Traditional Religion and Its Relevance for Reimagining National Unity in Africa

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## *Abstract*

Contemporary African states continue to grapple with fragile national cohesion amid ethnic pluralism, political fragmentation, and the enduring legacies of colonial state formation. Dominant models of nation-building, often derived from Western liberal individualism, have proven insufficient in addressing the relational and communal dynamics that shape African social realities. Adopting a conceptual, analytical, and interdisciplinary literature-based methodology, this article examines the concept of communal living in African Traditional Religion (ATR) as a normative and ontological framework for reimagining national unity in Africa. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from religious studies, political theology, and African philosophy, the study argues that ATR articulates a deeply relational vision of personhood in which identity, responsibility, and belonging are constituted through community. The article analyses key dimensions of communal life in ATR, including kinship structures, ancestral consciousness, moral obligation, and ritual solidarity, demonstrating how these elements foster social cohesion, conflict mediation, and collective responsibility. It further engages critically with the tensions between communal paradigms and modern state systems, particularly in contexts of religious pluralism, urbanisation, and democratic governance. Moving beyond romanticised readings of tradition, the study proposes a constructive framework for appropriating ATR's communal ethos within contemporary political and civic structures. By repositioning communal living as a viable resource for political imagination, this article contributes to ongoing debates on decolonising governance, rethinking nationhood, and integrating indigenous knowledge systems into public discourse. It concludes that sustainable national unity in Africa requires not merely

institutional reform but a reconfiguration of the moral and ontological foundations of social life grounded in relationality and shared belonging.

**Keywords:** Communal Living, African Traditional Religion (ATR), National Unity, Social Cohesion, Decolonial Theory, Moderate Communitarianism.

## *Introduction*

The crisis of national unity in contemporary Africa stems not merely from institutional weakness but from a deeper disconnect between imported Western models of nation-building and the relational, communal realities that shape African social life. Dominant frameworks, emphasising individual rights, legal-rational authority, and state sovereignty, often overlook how belonging, justice, and collective identity are traditionally mediated through kinship, ancestral memory, ritual solidarity, and mutual obligation. This article addresses the persistent marginalisation of African Traditional Religion (ATR) in political discourse, arguing that beneath its ritual practices lies a sophisticated communal ontology that offers a radically different conception of personhood and social cohesion. The central research question is straightforward yet demanding: How can communal living in ATR inform contemporary visions of national unity in Africa?

The thesis advanced here is that ATR's communal ontology provides a viable normative framework for reimagining national unity, provided it is engaged critically and constructively rather than romanticised. This relational ethos does not erase difference or suppress individual agency; rather, it situates personhood within networks of mutual responsibility, shared memory, and intergenerational continuity. The argument proceeds by first establishing a conceptual and theoretical framework grounded in African philosophy and decolonial theory; second, examining the concrete dimensions of communal life in ATR; third, analysing the structural drivers of contemporary fragmentation; fourth, exploring the functional dimensions of communal life as integrative mechanisms; fifth, examining points of convergence and tension with modern statecraft; sixth, proposing a constructive framework for translating ATR's communal values into civic ethics and governance models; seventh, addressing xenophobia in South Africa as a practical contradiction of communal ontology; and finally, drawing out implications for policy, public theology, and concluding reflections. Throughout, the paper insists that sustainable unity must be cultivated through shared moral imagination rather than legislated from above.

**Methodological Approach**

This study employs a qualitative, conceptual methodology that integrates critical hermeneutics, conceptual analysis, and decolonial theory. Rather than relying on primary ethnographic fieldwork or quantitative surveys, the research conducts a systematic, interdisciplinary literature review and textual analysis of philosophical,

theological, and political sources to reconstruct the normative claims embedded in ATR's communal practices. The critical hermeneutic method allows for the contextual interpretation of indigenous religious symbols, rituals, and ethical frameworks without freezing them in precolonial nostalgia. Within a decolonial framework, this approach validates how indigenous religious philosophy can be translated into normative political theory while explicitly guarding against uncritical essentialism. By treating ATR not as a static cultural artifact but as a living epistemic tradition, the methodology ensures that theoretical retrieval remains attentive to historical complexity, contemporary pluralism, and the practical demands of modern African governance.

**Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

To engage meaningfully with the proposition that ATR's communal ethos can inform national unity, we must first clarify the conceptual terrain. The terms "communal living," "national unity," and "African Traditional Religion" are frequently deployed in scholarly and public discourse, but they often carry unexamined assumptions that obscure rather than illuminate. Without precise conceptual grounding, the argument risks collapsing into vague cultural nationalism or romanticised traditionalism. This section, therefore, establishes the theoretical scaffolding for the analysis, drawing on African philosophy, political theology, and decolonial theory.

**Communal Ontology and Being-in-Relation**

At the heart of ATR lies a relational ontology. Unlike Western metaphysical traditions that often begin with the autonomous individual as the primary unit of reality, African traditional thought typically understands existence as fundamentally relational. Personhood is not a pre-given, isolated essence but a status achieved and sustained through community. This is not to say that individuality is denied, but rather that individuality is contextualised within a web of relationships that include the living, the unborn, the dead, and the spiritual realm.

Ifeanyi Menkiti's seminal essay "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought" provides a rigorous philosophical articulation of this position. Menkiti argues that in many African societies, personhood is a process rather than a static given. One becomes a person through participation in communal life, moral development, and fulfilment of social roles. This contrasts sharply with Cartesian or Lockean traditions that treat the self as a bounded, self-sufficient entity. Menkiti's formulation has been both influential and contested. Kwasi Wiredu, for instance, cautions against over-romanticising African communalism, noting that it can sometimes suppress dissent and legitimise hierarchical authority (Wiredu, 1996). Yet Wiredu does not reject relational ontology outright; rather, he insists on balancing communal responsibility with critical individual agency. This tension, between belonging and autonomy, tradition and critique, is central to the framework I develop here.

Kwame Gyekye further refines the concept by distinguishing between radical and moderate communitarianism. Radical communitarianism, he argues, risks subsuming the individual entirely within the collective, while moderate communitarianism identifies that individuals

possess inherent dignity and rights, even as they are embedded in community (Gyekye, 1997). Gyekye's moderate communitarianism aligns closely with the lived realities of many African societies, where communal obligation does not erase personal conscience but frames it within a broader moral ecology. This nuanced understanding prevents the argument from sliding into cultural determinism.

**African Philosophy of Personhood**

The African philosophy of personhood is inextricably linked to relational ontology. Mbiti's famous dictum, "I am because we are, and since we are therefore, I am" (Mbiti, 1969), captures the intersubjective nature of identity in traditional African thought. However, Mbiti's formulation has been critiqued for its potential to flatten diversity, particularly within contemporary, highly pluralistic urban spaces. In megacities like Lagos, Johannesburg, or Nairobi, identity is no longer bound by homogeneous lineage or localized ritual practice; it is shaped by transnational migration, religious hybridity, class differentiation, and digital connectivity. Applying Mbiti's dictum without critical adaptation risks imposing an idealised homogeneity that overlooks how urban Africans negotiate belonging across ethnic, religious, and national fault lines. Scholars like Ousseynou Mbaye and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni remind us that African societies have always contained hierarchies, gender inequalities, and contested interpretations of tradition (Mbaye, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The communal self is not a utopian ideal but a lived reality shaped by negotiation, conflict, and adaptation.

Nevertheless, the core insight remains robust: African personhood is constituted through participation. Rituals, naming ceremonies, initiation rites, and funerary practices are not merely cultural performances; they are ontological events that situate the individual within a broader moral and cosmic order. This has profound implications for political thought. If personhood is relational, then governance cannot be reduced to procedural mechanisms alone. It must cultivate the moral and social conditions that enable persons to flourish within a community.

**Political Theology and Religion in Public Life**

The intersection of religion and politics is unavoidable in the African context. Political theology, broadly understood as the study of how religious concepts shape political imagination, provides a useful lens for examining ATR's relevance to national unity. Scholars like Charles Taylor and Jürgen Habermas have debated the role of religion in the public sphere, often from a secularist standpoint that privileges rational deliberation over religious discourse. In Africa, however, religion, whether indigenous, Christian, or Islamic, remains deeply woven into public life, moral formation, and collective identity.

John Mbiti, E. Bolaji Idowu, and Geoffrey Parrinder all recognised that ATR is not merely a set of beliefs but a comprehensive worldview that orders social life, ethics, and governance. Idowu's *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* stresses the integrative function of ATR, arguing that it provides a moral framework that binds communities together across generations (Idowu, 1973). Parrinder, though writing from a missionary perspective, acknowledged the

sophistication of African cosmology and its emphasis on harmony, balance, and communal responsibility (Parrinder, 1954). Their work, while occasionally reflecting the theological biases of their eras, laid important groundwork for taking ATR seriously as a normative resource.

Contemporary political theologians in Africa, such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Tinyiko Maluleke, have extended this conversation by exploring how indigenous religious ethics can inform public theology, peacebuilding, and democratic practice. Oduyoye's work, for example, highlights the gendered dimensions of traditional communal structures, urging a critical retrieval that addresses patriarchy while preserving the relational ethos (Oduyoye, 1995). This critical engagement is essential if ATR is to contribute to inclusive national unity rather than reproduce exclusionary practices.

**Decolonial Theory and Epistemic Reconstruction**

The downgrading of ATR in political discourse is not an accident of history but a product of colonial epistemology. Decolonial theory, as articulated by scholars like Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, exposes how Western modernity constructed non-Western knowledge systems as inferior, irrational, or obsolete. The colonial state actively suppressed indigenous religious practices, replacing them with imported legal and administrative frameworks that often clashed with local worldviews. Post-independence elites, in many cases, inherited these structures without fundamentally reimagining them.

As an operational analytical tool, this study deploys decoloniality to interrogate the epistemic hierarchies that continue to marginalise indigenous political thought. Drawing on Mignolo's concept of the "epistemic locus of enunciation," the analysis centres African cosmologies not as objects of Western scrutiny but as valid sources of political imagination. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's concept of the "coloniality of power" explains how epistemic hierarchies persist long after formal decolonisation, shaping governance, education, and public discourse (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Reclaiming ATR's communal ontology, therefore, is not a nostalgic exercise but an act of epistemic reconstruction. It involves identifying that African societies possess indigenous frameworks for managing conflict, fostering solidarity, and imagining collective futures, frameworks that were disrupted but never fully erased.

Decolonial theory also cautions against essentialism. As Achille Mbembe warns, romanticising tradition can trap Africa in a static past, ignoring the dynamic, hybrid, and often contradictory realities of contemporary life (Mbembe, 2001). The goal is not to return to a precolonial golden age but to critically appropriate indigenous insights in ways that speak to present challenges. This requires a dialogical approach that respects tradition while remaining open to critique, adaptation, and pluralism.

**Communal Living in African Traditional Religion**

To understand how ATR's communal ethos might inform national unity, we must first look closely at how communal living actually functions within traditional African religious contexts. This is not an exercise in anthropological cataloguing, but a deliberate effort to

uncover the normative and ontological structures that make communal life meaningful, sustainable, and morally binding. ATR is often mischaracterised as primitive animism or fragmented superstition, but a careful reading of its core dimensions reveals a sophisticated system of social integration, ethical regulation, and cosmic harmony.

**Holistic Worldview: Unity of Visible and Invisible Realms**

One of the most distinctive features of ATR is its holistic cosmology. Unlike dualistic frameworks that separate the sacred from the secular, the material from the spiritual, ATR perceives reality as an interconnected whole. The visible world of the living is continuous with the invisible realm of ancestors, spirits, and deities. This is not a belief system detached from everyday life; it is a lived reality that shapes how communities understand justice, misfortune, success, and responsibility.

Mbiti's analysis of African cosmology emphasises this continuity. He notes that in traditional African thought, the spiritual and physical realms are not opposed but interpenetrating. Ancestors are not distant ghosts but active participants in communal life, monitoring moral conduct, offering guidance, and holding the community accountable (Mbiti, 1969). This worldview fosters a profound sense of accountability that extends beyond the living generation. When a person acts unjustly, the consequences are not merely legal or social but cosmic; they disrupt harmony and invite ancestral displeasure. Conversely, acts of generosity, reconciliation, and communal solidarity are seen as restoring balance and earning ancestral blessing.

This holistic vision has direct implications for political imagination. Modern states often operate within a strictly secular, legal-rational framework that separates morality from governance. ATR, by contrast, refuses this separation. Governance, in traditional contexts, is not merely about enforcing laws but about maintaining cosmic and social harmony. Chiefs, elders, and ritual specialists are not just political figures; they are moral custodians tasked with mediating between the human and spiritual realms. While this model cannot be directly transplanted into modern constitutional democracies, it raises an important question: can contemporary governance recover a sense of moral accountability that transcends mere procedural compliance?

**Kinship and Extended Family Structures**

Kinship is the bedrock of communal living in ATR. The extended family, or lineage, is not simply a biological unit but a moral and economic network that provides identity, security, and obligation. In many African societies, the concept of family extends beyond blood ties to include clan members, age-mates, and even non-kin who are incorporated through adoption or ritual affiliation. This expansive understanding of kinship fosters a culture of mutual aid, shared responsibility, and collective problem-solving.

E. Bolaji Idowu underscores that traditional African society is fundamentally a family society, where political, economic, and religious life are organised around kinship principles (Idowu, 1973). Land is held communally, resources are distributed according to need, and conflicts are

resolved through familial and clan mechanisms rather than impersonal courts. This does not mean that traditional societies were egalitarian or free from conflict; hierarchies existed, and disputes over inheritance, marriage, and leadership were common. Yet the kinship framework provided a structure for negotiating these conflicts within a context of shared belonging.

The erosion of kinship structures through urbanisation, capitalist labour markets, and state centralisation has had profound consequences for social cohesion. As people migrate to cities for work, extended families fragment, and the traditional safety nets weaken. The state is expected to fill the gap, but it often lacks the moral authority and localised knowledge to do so effectively. Reimagining national unity requires acknowledging this rupture and exploring how kinship principles, adapted to modern contexts, can foster civic solidarity without idealising the past.

**Role of Ancestors in Shaping Communal Identity**

Ancestral veneration is frequently misunderstood by outsiders as idolatry or primitive ancestor worship. In reality, it is a sophisticated mechanism for maintaining intergenerational continuity, moral accountability, and communal identity. Ancestors are not worshipped as gods; they are revered as elders who have passed into the spiritual realm and continue to influence the living. They serve as moral witnesses, cultural transmitters, and unifying symbols.

Geoffrey Parrinder, despite his missionary background, recognised the social function of ancestral veneration. He noted that ancestors embody the collective memory of the community, linking past, present, and future generations (Parrinder, 1954). Rituals of remembrance, such as libations, funerary ceremonies, and naming practices, are not merely religious acts; they are civic rituals that reinforce shared identity and moral continuity. When a community honours its ancestors, it is also reaffirming its values, obligations, and sense of belonging.

In the context of national unity, ancestral consciousness offers a powerful metaphor for intergenerational responsibility. Modern political discourse often prioritises short-term gains, electoral cycles, and immediate economic indicators. ATR's ancestral framework, by contrast, insists that decisions must consider their impact on future generations. This long-term orientation is essential for sustainable governance, environmental stewardship, and social justice. Could national unity be reimagined as a covenant between generations, where citizens see themselves as stewards of a shared legacy rather than competitors for immediate advantage?

**Moral Order and Shared Responsibility**

ATR's communal living is sustained by a robust moral order that highlights shared responsibility, reciprocity, and restorative justice. Unlike legal systems that focus primarily on punishment and deterrence, traditional African moral frameworks value reconciliation, reintegration, and the restoration of social harmony. Wrongdoing is not merely an offence

against an individual or the state; it is a disruption of communal balance that requires collective healing.

Kwame Gyekye's analysis of African ethics highlights this restorative orientation. He notes that traditional moral systems stress duties over rights, not to negate individual dignity but to situate it within a broader web of obligations (Gyekye, 1997). Theft, violence, or betrayal are addressed through dialogue, mediation, and ritual cleansing to reintegrate the offender into the community. This approach recognises that exclusion often breeds further alienation, while accountability within a context of belonging fosters genuine transformation.

The tension between this restorative ethic and modern punitive justice systems is well documented. Critics argue that traditional mechanisms can be informal, inconsistent, or biased toward elite interests. Defenders counter that they are more accessible, culturally resonant, and effective at addressing the root causes of conflict. Rather than choosing one over the other, a constructive framework might integrate restorative principles into contemporary justice systems, adapting them to pluralistic, rights-based contexts while preserving their communal ethos.

**Rituals and Festivals as Instruments of Social Cohesion**

Rituals and festivals are not peripheral to ATR; they are central to its communal function. Seasonal celebrations, initiation rites, harvest festivals, and ancestral commemorations serve as moments of collective renewal, where social bonds are reaffirmed, hierarchies are temporarily suspended, and shared identity is performed. Victor Turner's concept of *communitas*, though developed in anthropological studies outside Africa, resonates with the transformative potential of African ritual life. Rituals create liminal spaces where ordinary social divisions are blurred, and participants experience a heightened sense of unity (Turner, 1969).

In many African societies, festivals are not merely religious events but civic occasions that involve the entire community. There are times of redistribution, where wealth is shared, disputes are settled, and collective decisions are made. They also serve as pedagogical spaces, where elders transmit values, history, and moral instruction to younger generations. The decline of these practices in urban and secularised contexts has left a void in civic culture, replaced by consumerism, political polarisation, and fragmented identities.

Reintegrating ritual-like civic practices into public life, whether through national days of reflection, community service initiatives, or culturally grounded educational programs, could help rebuild the moral infrastructure of national unity. This does not require imposing a single religious framework; rather, it involves creating spaces where diverse communities can practice solidarity, remember shared histories, and negotiate differences in a context of mutual respect.

**Functional Dimensions of Communal Life and the Contemporary Crisis of National Unity**

Understanding ATR's communal ethos requires examining how relational ontology functions in everyday social life, not as abstract philosophy but as a practical system addressing belonging, justice, economic survival, and identity formation. The following dimensions illustrate how these principles operate as integrative mechanisms.

**Social Integration and Belonging**

Communal living functions as a primary mechanism of social integration. Kinship networks, age-grade systems, and ritual affiliations historically provided the architecture of belonging, where identity was derived from participation rather than documentation. Age-grade systems, for instance, create cross-cutting ties that bind diverse lineages into a cohesive social fabric, mobilising resources and mediating disputes during crises. Their decline in urban contexts has left gaps in youth socialisation and civic engagement, contributing to alienation.

**Conflict Resolution and Restorative Justice**

ATR's approach to conflict resolution is fundamentally restorative. Mechanisms like Rwanda's *gacaca*, Uganda's *mato oput*, and West African palaver systems prioritise truth-telling, accountability, and reconciliation over adversarial litigation (Gade, 2012). By focusing on healing rather than punishment, these systems address the relational ruptures that fuel long-term fragmentation.

**Ethical Regulation of Individual Behaviour**

Communal ethics operate through internalised norms transmitted via proverbs, oral traditions, and ritual practice. The concept of *ubuntu* encapsulates this orientation, framing ethical behaviour as a communal expectation rather than a private choice (Metz, 2007). When these normative ecologies erode, societies often experience rising individualism, corruption, and moral apathy.

**Economic Cooperation and Mutual Support**

Traditional economic life is deeply relational. Systems like *esusu* (rotating savings clubs) and communal farming frame wealth as collective trust rather than private accumulation (Idowu, 1973). Accumulation is acceptable when it serves communal well-being, contrasting sharply with neoliberal models that prioritise individual extraction.

**Preservation of Collective Memory and Identity**

Collective memory is sustained through ritual, oral transmission, and sacred sites, fostering intergenerational continuity (Ramose, 1999). In pluralistic societies, this framework highlights negotiation and shared narrative-building rather than erasure, offering a template for inclusive national historiography.

**The Contemporary Crisis of National Unity**

These functional dimensions operate within a context profoundly disrupted by colonialism, urbanisation, and state formation. Colonial statecraft institutionalised ethnic categories through indirect rule, transforming fluid identities into fixed political units that post-independence elites exploited for electoral mobilisation (Mamdani, 1996). Decades of authoritarian rule and economic mismanagement have eroded civic trust, prompting citizens to seek security in ethnic or religious networks rather than state institutions (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). Artificial borders imposed at the Berlin Conference grouped historically distinct communities into single states, creating enduring tensions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Rapid urbanisation has further weakened communal structures, replacing kinship networks with anonymous neighbourhoods (Potts, 2012). Meanwhile, religious pluralism becomes fragmented when political actors manipulate exclusivist narratives, and the marginalisation of ATR creates a spiritual vacuum filled by fundamentalism or cynicism (Gifford, 2004).

Crucially, the erosion of ATR's functional dimensions does not merely represent cultural loss; it creates a normative vacuum that contemporary governance has failed to fill. When restorative justice mechanisms are displaced by overburdened formal courts, when communal economic safety nets dissolve without adequate state substitution, and when collective memory is supplanted by instrumentalised national histories, the outcome is not modernisation but moral disorientation. This gap helps explain why institutional reforms alone often yield disappointing results: they address the architecture of power without rebuilding the relational foundations that make collective life meaningful. Reimagining national unity thus requires more than institutional reform; it demands engaging the relational ethics of ATR to cultivate moral foundations for cohesion that transcend ethnic arithmetic, rebuild trust through accountable stewardship, and foster inclusive belonging in pluralistic, urbanising societies (Gyekye, 1997).

**Points of Convergence and Tension**

The relationship between ATR's communal ethos and modern political systems is neither seamless nor irreconcilable. It is marked by genuine points of convergence as well as profound tensions. Recognising both is essential for avoiding either romanticised traditionalism or uncritical modernism.

**Communitarian Elements in African Political Thought**

African political thought has long contained communitarian elements that resonate with ATR's communal ethos. Thinkers like Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, and Léopold Sédar Senghor all drew on indigenous values in their visions of African socialism and cultural nationalism. Nyerere's *Ujamaa*, for example, underscored familyhood, mutual aid, and collective responsibility, drawing explicitly on traditional communal principles (Nyerere, 1967). While *Ujamaa* faced practical challenges in implementation, its normative vision remains relevant for reimagining inclusive development.

Contemporary African political philosophy continues to explore communitarian alternatives to liberal individualism. Scholars like Thaddeus Metz and Mogobe B. Ramose have developed *ubuntu*-based political theories that stress relational dignity, consensus democracy, and restorative justice (Metz, 2007; Ramose, 1999). These frameworks do not reject democracy but seek to ground it in African moral ecology, where personhood is relational, and governance is participatory.

**The Tension Between Communalism and Individual Rights**

The most significant tension between ATR's communal paradigm and modern state systems revolves around the relationship between communal obligation and individual rights. Liberal political theory prioritises individual autonomy, freedom of expression, and protection from state overreach. ATR's communal framework, by contrast, underscores duty, reciprocity, and social harmony. This tension is not merely theoretical; it manifests in real debates over gender equality, freedom of religion, minority rights, and political dissent.

Critics of African communalism, including Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Anthony Appiah, warn that excessive emphasis on community can suppress dissent, legitimise patriarchy, and marginalise non-conformists (Wiredu, 1996; Appiah, 2006). They argue that individual rights are essential protections against communal tyranny and that modern states must safeguard them even when they conflict with traditional norms. These concerns are valid. Traditional societies have often restricted women's rights, punished sexual minorities, and silenced critics in the name of communal harmony.

Yet the tension is not irreconcilable. Communal responsibility and individual rights are not mutually exclusive; they can be mutually reinforcing. A community that respects individual dignity is stronger, not weaker. A person who exercises freedom responsibly contributes to communal flourishing. The challenge is to develop a moderate communitarianism that respects relational ontology while safeguarding individual agency. This requires critical retrieval: preserving the ethos of mutual obligation while reforming patriarchal, exclusionary, or authoritarian practices.

**Inclusivity in Religiously Plural Societies**

Another tension arises in the context of religious pluralism. ATR's communal framework is deeply embedded in indigenous cosmology, which may not be shared by Christians, Muslims or secular citizens. In pluralistic societies, privileging one religious framework can exclude others and breed resentment. This raises the question: can ATR's communal ethos inform national unity without imposing religious homogeneity?

The answer lies in distinguishing between religious doctrine and civic ethics. ATR's emphasis on relationality, accountability, and shared destiny can be translated into secular civic values without requiring adherence to specific theological beliefs. Interfaith initiatives, inclusive education, and pluralistic public theology can foster a moral ecology that cherishes diversity while cultivating shared responsibility. The goal is not to replace Christianity or Islam with ATR but to draw on indigenous wisdom to enrich pluralistic coexistence.

**Risk of Ethnocentrism or Exclusion**

Finally, there is the risk of ethnocentrism. When communal frameworks are tied to specific ethnic groups, they can become exclusionary, reinforcing division rather than unity. This is particularly relevant in states where traditional authority is ethnically bound. Reimagining national unity requires decoupling communal ethics from ethnic particularism, stressing shared values that transcend group boundaries.

This does not mean erasing ethnic identity but situating it within a broader civic framework. National unity is not homogeneity; it is harmonious diversity. ATR's communal ethos, when critically adapted, can contribute to this harmonisation by fostering mutual respect, reciprocal obligation, and shared destiny across ethnic lines.

**Toward a Constructive Framework for National Unity**

Moving from critique to construction, this section outlines a framework for appropriating ATR's communal ethos within contemporary political and civic structures. The goal is not to replace modern institutions with traditional ones but to infuse governance, education, and public life with relational principles that foster sustainable national unity. This framework is pragmatic, historically informed, and critically engaged, identifying both the possibilities and limitations of traditional paradigms in modern contexts.

**Translating ATR Communal Values into Civic Ethics**

The first step is translation: extracting the core ethical principles of ATR and adapting them into civic norms that can be embraced across religious and ethnic lines. Key principles include relational dignity, mutual accountability, restorative justice, intergenerational responsibility, and communal solidarity. These are not inherently religious; they can be secularised and institutionalised as civic virtues.

Civic education programs can integrate these principles into school curricula, stressing empathy, cooperation, and collective problem-solving. Public campaigns can promote values of transparency, accountability, and mutual care, shifting the cultural narrative from competition to collaboration. The key is to avoid dogmatism; civic ethics must be inclusive, dialogical, and open to critique.

**Integrating Communal Responsibility into Governance Models**

Governance in Africa often suffers from a top-down, bureaucratic approach that alienates citizens. Integrating communal responsibility into governance requires decentralizing power, fostering participatory decision-making, and recognising traditional authorities as partners rather than rivals. Community councils, citizen assemblies, and local cooperatives can provide platforms for direct participation, ensuring that policies reflect lived realities.

This does not mean romanticising traditional leadership, which can be patriarchal or unaccountable. Rather, it involves creating hybrid governance models that combine democratic accountability with communal participation. When citizens feel that their voices

matter, when leaders are seen as stewards rather than owners of power, trust and unity gradually strengthen.

**Role of Education and Cultural Institutions**

Education is the primary vehicle for moral and civic formation. Modern African education systems often prioritise technical skills and Western curricula, neglecting indigenous knowledge, moral philosophy, and communal values. Reimagining national unity requires educational reform that integrates African philosophy, oral traditions, and ethical pedagogy into formal schooling.

Cultural institutions, museums, theatres, media outlets, and community centres can also play a vital role in fostering shared identity. By celebrating diverse traditions, promoting intergenerational dialogue, and creating spaces for collective reflection, these institutions can rebuild the moral infrastructure of national unity. The goal is not uniformity but harmonious diversity, where citizens see their histories reflected in the national story.

**Dialogue Between Traditional and Modern Political Systems**

The relationship between traditional and modern systems need not be adversarial. In many African states, chiefs, elders, and religious leaders coexist with elected officials, sometimes collaborating, sometimes competing. A constructive framework distinguishes both systems as legitimate and seeks dialogue rather than domination.

This requires institutionalising channels for collaboration: joint advisory councils, conflict mediation committees, and policy consultation forums. It also involves critical reform: ensuring that traditional authorities are accountable, inclusive, and respectful of human rights, while ensuring that state institutions are culturally literate, accessible, and responsive to local needs. Dialogue does not mean compromise on justice; it means finding common ground in shared values.

**A Relational Model of National Unity: Concrete Applications**

The culmination of this framework is a relational model of national unity, grounded in shared belonging and moral responsibility. This model acknowledges that unity is not a static condition but an ongoing project of negotiation, participation, and mutual care. It honours diversity without fracturing solidarity, accentuates duty without suppressing rights, and values tradition without freezing it in the past.

Crucially, this model is not purely theoretical; it has already found partial expression in several African contexts. Botswana's *Kgotla* system integrates traditional participatory deliberation with modern parliamentary governance, fostering high levels of civic trust and social cohesion. Rwanda's post-genocide *gacaca* courts successfully adapted communal truth-telling and restorative justice to address mass atrocity, demonstrating how traditional reconciliation mechanisms can be institutionalised within formal legal frameworks. Ghana's National Peace Council leverages interfaith and traditional leadership networks to mediate electoral disputes and prevent violence, illustrating how pluralistic civic structures can harness indigenous

conflict-resolution ethics. In South Africa, community-based organisations in townships have revived *ubuntu*-inspired mutual aid networks to address service delivery failures, proving that relational solidarity remains a practical response to urban precarity. These examples demonstrate that translating ATR's communal ethos into civic life is neither utopian nor untested; it is a scalable, context-sensitive practice that can be systematically integrated into national policy.

**Implications for Policy and Public Theology**

The constructive framework outlined above is not merely theoretical; it has direct implications for policy and public theology. National unity cannot be achieved through rhetoric alone; it requires concrete interventions that align institutional practice with relational ethics. This section examines how ATR's communal values can inform nation-building strategies, peacebuilding frameworks, civic education, and the role of religious actors in public life.

**Nation-Building Strategies Informed by Indigenous Values**

Policy frameworks that value inclusive development, participatory governance, and cultural recognition are more likely to foster sustainable unity. This means moving beyond GDP-centric metrics to measure well-being through social cohesion, trust, and collective flourishing. It also means designing policies that honour indigenous land rights, support community-based economies, and protect cultural heritage.

States can institutionalise traditional dispute resolution mechanisms within formal justice systems, adapt communal resource management models for sustainable development, and fund community initiatives that foster mutual aid. The key is to avoid tokenism; indigenous values must be integrated meaningfully, not symbolically.

**Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution Frameworks**

ATR's restorative ethos offers powerful tools for peacebuilding. Post-conflict reconstruction often focuses on security and infrastructure, neglecting the moral and relational dimensions of healing. Restorative justice, truth-telling ceremonies, and community mediation can address trauma, rebuild trust, and prevent the recurrence of violence.

Peacebuilding initiatives should involve traditional leaders, women's groups, youth organisations, and religious actors in dialogue and reconciliation. They should prioritise accountability without vengeance, memory without victimisation, and unity without erasure. The goal is not to forget the past but to transform it into a foundation for a shared future.

**Civic Education and Identity Formation**

Civic education is a long-term investment in national unity. Curricula should integrate African philosophy, ethical pedagogy, and pluralistic history, fostering critical thinking, empathy, and civic responsibility. Schools should be spaces where students learn to negotiate differences, practice cooperation, and envision shared destiny.

Teacher training, community involvement, and experiential learning can enhance civic education. National service programs, youth councils, and intergenerational mentorship can also foster solidarity. The goal is to cultivate citizens who see themselves as stewards of a shared legacy, not competitors for individual advantage.

**Role of Religious Actors in Public Life**

Religious leaders wield significant influence in African societies. When they promote exclusivist narratives, they can fuel division. When they model inclusivity, empathy, and service, they can foster unity. Public theology should encourage religious actors to engage constructively in civic life, promoting interfaith dialogue, social justice, and moral accountability.

States should protect religious freedom while preventing the politicisation of religion. Religious institutions should be encouraged to focus on spiritual and moral formation rather than partisan politics. The goal is not secularism that excludes religion, but pluralism that honours it while safeguarding civic unity.

**Xenophobia in South Africa: A Contradiction of African Communal Ontology**

No discussion of communal living in African Traditional Religion and its relevance for national unity in Africa would be complete without confronting one of the most painful contradictions on the continent today: xenophobic violence in South Africa. Since the first major outbreaks in 2008, recurrent attacks targeting foreign nationals, predominantly black Africans from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Somalia, Nigeria, and other neighbouring countries, have exposed a deep fracture between the relational ethics of African communalism and the lived realities of contemporary South African society. This section argues that xenophobia, particularly in its South African manifestation, represents a fundamental betrayal of the communal ontology that undergirds African Traditional Religion and African descent worldviews. Far from being an expression of authentic African values, xenophobic violence is alien to the ethos of *ubuntu*, kinship reciprocity, and ancestral accountability that have sustained African communities for generations.

It is important to name the phenomenon accurately. While "xenophobia" is the commonly used term, several scholars have argued that what unfolds in South Africa is more precisely *afro-phobia*: hostility directed specifically at black African foreigners, while white or Asian migrants often face significantly less violence (Kaungu, 2021). This distinction matters because it reveals that the violence is not simply about nationality or legal status; it is entangled with colourism, historical grievance, and the internalisation of colonial hierarchies that ranked African lives differently. As Nyamnjoh observes, the derogatory term *makwerekwere*, used to dehumanise black African foreigners, functions as a linguistic mechanism of exclusion that constructs certain Africans as less than fully human, less deserving of hospitality, and less entitled to belonging (Nyamnjoh, 2006).

This targeted hostility stands in stark contrast to the inclusive relationality prescribed by African Traditional Religion. In ATR, the stranger is not an automatic threat but a potential

guest, a bearer of dignity, and a participant in the web of communal obligation. Mbiti's formulation, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1969), does not contain an asterisk limiting "we" to co-nationals or co-ethnics. The ontology of personhood in ATR is expansive: it includes the living, the dead, the unborn, and, by ethical extension, the stranger who enters the community seeking refuge or opportunity. To deny this extension is to fracture the very logic of relational identity that ATR upholds.

**Ubuntu Betrayed: When Communal Ethics Are Weaponised**

Perhaps the most painful irony is that xenophobic actors in South Africa sometimes invoke *ubuntu* or "African values" to justify exclusion. This represents a profound distortion of the concept. As Metz (2007) argues in his influential articulation of an African moral theory, *ubuntu* ethics value harmony, solidarity, and the enhancement of communal relationships; they do not license violence against those perceived as outsiders (Metz, 2007). When mobs attack foreign-owned shops or expel migrants from townships in the name of "protecting South Africans," they are not practising *ubuntu*; they are practising its antithesis, what Nussbaum (2003) calls "darkened Ubuntu," where the language of community is hijacked to serve parochial interests (Nussbaum, 2003).

Koenane (2018) puts the point sharply: xenophobic violence in South Africa reflects a "regrettable disregard for the spirit of *ubuntu* that ought to bind African peoples together in mutual care and hospitality" (Koenane, 2018). The betrayal is especially acute because many of the targeted migrants come from countries that hosted South African exiles during the anti-apartheid struggle. Botswana, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe provided sanctuary, education, and political support to the liberation movement. To now treat citizens of those nations as unwelcome interlopers is not only ethically inconsistent; it is historically amnesiac. ATR's emphasis on ancestral memory and intergenerational gratitude should make such forgetfulness unthinkable.

**Structural Drivers and the Overwhelming of Communal Ethics**

To say that xenophobia is alien to African communal ontology is not to deny the complex structural factors that fuel it. Empirical sociological studies have consistently documented how migration patterns, labour market competition, and spatial inequality intersect with political rhetoric to trigger violence. Research by Misago, Landau, and Monson (2009) demonstrates that xenophobic outbreaks frequently correlate with neighbourhoods experiencing high unemployment, inadequate service delivery, and informal economic competition, where migrants are scapegoated as direct threats to livelihood. Jonathan Crush's longitudinal analyses further reveal that South Africa's post-apartheid migration governance has been characterised by securitisation and policy ambiguity, which legitimises public hostility and normalises exclusionary narratives (Crush, 2018). Landau (2011) notes that xenophobic violence often erupts in contexts where traditional mechanisms of conflict mediation have weakened and where state institutions are perceived as distant or unresponsive. The erosion of communal infrastructure creates a vacuum that violence fills.

However, recognising structural drivers does not absolve the ethical failure. ATR's communal framework was never designed for conditions of abundance; it evolved precisely to manage scarcity through principles of sharing, rotation, and mutual aid. The *esusu* rotating savings system, communal granaries, and age-grade labour pools were institutional responses to resource constraints. The problem in contemporary South Africa is not that communal ethics are impractical under scarcity; it is that they have been displaced by a competitive individualism that treats the stranger as a rival rather than a neighbour.

**Reclaiming Communal Ethics Toward a Philoxenic Public Culture**

If xenophobia is a betrayal of African communal ontology, then the antidote must involve a deliberate reclamation of those ethics in public life. This is not a call for naive idealism; it is a pragmatic proposal grounded in existing cultural resources. Several pathways merit consideration.

First, civic education initiatives should explicitly teach the inclusive dimensions of *ubuntu* and ATR ethics. Rather than presenting communalism as an abstract ideal, curricula can highlight historical examples of African hospitality to strangers, the moral obligations of hosts in traditional societies, and the cosmological basis for respecting human dignity regardless of origin. As Kaungu (2021) argues, embedding these values in school programs and public campaigns can help shift the cultural narrative from suspicion to solidarity (Kaungu, 2021).

Second, traditional leadership structures, chiefs, elders, and ritual specialists, can be engaged as partners in peacebuilding. In many rural and peri-urban communities, these figures retain moral authority that state officials lack. When they publicly affirm the duty to welcome the stranger, when they mediate disputes between locals and migrants using restorative rather than punitive approaches, they model the communal ethics that xenophobia violates. This requires careful navigation to avoid reinforcing patriarchal or exclusionary aspects of traditional authority, but the potential for constructive engagement is significant.

Third, interfaith and intercultural dialogue platforms can create spaces where South Africans and foreign nationals encounter one another as persons rather than stereotypes. ATR's ritual practices, shared meals, communal prayers, and seasonal festivals offer templates for building trust across differences. When Christians, Muslims, and adherents of indigenous traditions come together to condemn violence and affirm shared humanity, they embody the relational ontology that xenophobia denies.

**Communal Ontology as Antidote**

Xenophobia in South Africa is not an inevitable expression of African identity; it is a moral failure that contradicts the deepest commitments of African Traditional Religion. The communal ontology that understands personhood as constituted through relationship, that honours the stranger as a bearer of dignity, and that holds communities accountable to ancestral standards of hospitality, offers a powerful normative resource for reimagining belonging in pluralistic societies. To embrace this ontology is not to deny the real grievances

that fuel xenophobic sentiment; it is to insist that those grievances be addressed through solidarity rather than violence, through inclusion rather than expulsion.

The question for South Africa, and for the continent, is whether the ethic of "I am because we are" can be extended to include the African stranger, the migrant worker, the refugee seeking safety. If national unity is to be more than a rhetorical aspiration, it must be grounded in a moral imagination capacious enough to recognise that the web of relationality does not stop at the border. In that recognition lies the possibility of a unity that is not imposed but cultivated, not exclusive but expansive, not fragile but resilient. That is the promise of communal living in African Traditional Religion, and it remains as urgent today as ever.

## Conclusion

Sustainable national unity in Africa requires more than institutional reform; it demands a reconfiguration of the moral and ontological foundations of social life. ATR's communal ontology, with its emphasis on relational personhood, mutual accountability, restorative justice, and intergenerational continuity, offers a viable normative framework for reimagining unity. This is not a call to return to the past but an invitation to critically appropriate indigenous wisdom in ways that speak to contemporary challenges. The argument presented here has wrestled with complexity, acknowledged tensions, and avoided easy solutions. National unity is not uniformity; it is harmonious diversity. It is not imposed from above; it is cultivated through participation, dialogue, and shared responsibility. ATR's communal ethos, when critically translated into civic ethics, governance models, and public theology, can contribute to this project.

The study also offers a normative model for social cohesion that can be tested empirically, adapted contextually, and debated critically. It invites further research into how communal principles can be institutionalised, how gender and minority rights can be safeguarded within relational frameworks, and how pluralistic societies can cultivate shared moral ecologies. Scholars should continue to engage critically with indigenous frameworks, safeguarding rights while honouring relationality, fostering pluralism while cultivating solidarity

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