

# Christianity, Communality, and Resilience in the Wake of COVID-19 in African Religious Worlds

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The COVID-19 pandemic marked an inexplicable existential rupture at the heart of global human life, leaving festering wounds across multiple dimensions: epidemiological, economic, spiritual, political, psychological, and moral. For the first time in modern global civilization, draconian lockdown measures were implemented worldwide, including in democratic societies. The virus was widely described as *apocalyptic*, not only for its biological threat but also for its revelatory nature it exposed the desperate evil concealed within the human heart, even amidst the so-called ideals of democratic civilization. It unmasked the undemocratic and unjust tendencies lurking within the frameworks of democracy and international justice. The post-COVID-19 world now carries the material legacy of global shame, and in some contexts, the courage to discriminate and marginalize is nowhere more evident than in the case of the United States.

The African context, however, revealed a striking paradox—where structural vulnerabilities collided with profound communal resilience, as religious and cultural networks emerged as lifelines amidst state-imposed lockdowns and global vaccine inequities. At the onset of the pandemic, global attention turned to Africa with grim expectations. Burdened by under-resourced public health systems, governance challenges, and pre-existing conditions such as HIV and AIDS, many assumed the continent would face catastrophic loss. Yet, to the surprise of much of the world, Africa recorded comparatively fewer COVID-19-related deaths. This unexpected outcome was not merely a product of epidemiological factors but also a testament to deeply rooted communal traditions, notably the ethos of *Ubuntu*—the African philosophy of radical relational solidarity, interdependence, and intricately bounded shared humanity (Kaunda 2023). Through culturally grounded and yet adaptive practices of caregiving, spiritual communion, and burial rites, African Christian communities reimagined life and meaning amid the crisis, even as they contended with limited resources. Despite this resilience, Africa remained subject to global marginalization. Travel bans targeting African nations, delayed access to vaccines, and the dismissive portrayal of African healthcare systems all reinforced entrenched hierarchies of race, nationality, and the coloniality of power. While global rhetoric espoused solidarity and justice, actual practices frequently manifested exclusion and systemic neglect. In the face of this, a continent often portrayed as chronically ‘unprepared’ defied such fatalistic projections—responding not with despair, but with *innovative adaptations* from below and a *grounded resilience* that renegotiated the uncertainties of the moment on African terms.

Within Christian communities, the pandemic disrupted deeply held notions of bonded spiritual families, which had been traditionally constituted through physical participation in sacramental life. It exposed the limitations of so-called *e-families*. While online spiritual engagement has become necessary and even beneficial in many contexts, it cannot replace the embodied, communal experience of the local church—the *physical family of God*. COVID-19 implicitly contested the sufficiency of virtual presence in the formation of the Christian community. In many African religious contexts, people struggled to transcend digital distance and establish meaningful spiritual connection via online platforms. While such tools were essential during the crisis, they remain limited and should be understood as supplementary rather than substitutive means of building faith communities (Kaunda et al. 2022; Kaunda 2023; Munyao et al. 2022; Asamoah-Gyadu et al. 2024).

In Africa, where kinship and communality form the backbone of both social and Christian life, the pandemic functioned as an ambivalent blessing—one that, for better or worse, catalyzed significant rethinking and reconfiguration of religious practice, experience, and the interpretation of communal values (Kaunda et al. 2022; Kaunda 2023; Munyao et al. 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). As John Mbiti (1970) emphasized, African kinship constitutes the foundational matrix from which values such as communality, identity, resilience, and spirituality derive meaning. African religious and specifically Christian societies demonstrated remarkable resilience, not through rigid preservation of traditional forms, but through creative reinterpretations and adaptive responses. This is consistent with Africa’s long history of religious flexibility. Three illustrative examples demonstrate this adaptive tradition:

- During colonial Christianity, many indigenous religious systems, realizing the imbalance of power, disguised and recontextualized themselves within Christian forms. What seemed like a conversion was, in many cases, a spiritual camouflage. Much of African spirituality survived and even thrived through syncretic expressions within Christianity.
- During the HIV/AIDS pandemic, certain traditional practices, such as widow cleansing, were identified as vectors of transmission. Communities swiftly reconfigured these rites into symbolic blessings, thereby maintaining cultural meaning while minimizing harm.
- During the Ebola crisis in West Africa, traditional burial rites involving physical contact with the dead were similarly reimaged—symbolic gestures replaced direct physical acts.

Likewise, during the COVID-19 pandemic, African Christian communities demonstrated adaptability through the ingenious use of digital platforms to sustain religious practices and social bonds, however attenuated (Adogame 2024; Munyao et al. 2022; Sibanda et al. 2022; Kaunda et al. 2022; Kaunda 2023; Asamoah-Gyadu et al. 2024).

This special issue explores these adaptations and the reconfiguration of religious elements during moments of disruption. It seeks to illuminate the shifts that occurred, highlighting the adaptive resilience of African Christian societies and how these changes impacted kinship ties and communal values among diverse groups—youth, women, men, religious leaders, and elders—during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The articles in this volume offer innovative and nuanced insights into how COVID-19 both influenced and challenged religious practices, kinship structures, communal values, and questions of social justice across African societies. They shed light on survival strategies, reimaged rituals, and the possible futures of religious and communal life in Africa.

The first three articles demonstrate how COVID-19 redefined and challenged African communality and religious practices. They argue that the pandemic fundamentally disrupted African religious life and values of communality, compelling communities to renegotiate traditional practices across both physical and virtual spaces. Musili's ethnography of Nomiya Church in Kenya highlights how African values of communality—deeply rooted in physical gatherings—were challenged by the shift to digital worship. Although virtual spaces initially limited authentic communal expressions, innovative adaptations revealed the potential for reinterpreting communality online, reflecting a nuanced experience of digital Christianity shaped by evolving media environments. Similarly, Muyambo and Sibanda's study in Zimbabwe reveals the disruptive impact of COVID-19 on *Ubuntu*—the African philosophy of humanness, compassion, and togetherness. They contend that pandemic containment measures fractured this core identity, unsettling social cohesion and spiritual practices, and testing African humanness at its roots during lockdowns and social distancing. Maseno's research on CITAM Ngong Church in Kenya complements these findings by documenting the complex process of technology adoption in creating religious virtual spaces. Her study emphasizes generational and resource-based disparities affecting access, underscoring that technology adoption in religious settings is a socially embedded and uneven process.

The next four articles focus on kinship, social capital, and urban religious communities. They demonstrate how the pandemic's disruption of traditional kinship networks in urban African settings prompted alternative community formations within churches. Chamwama's work in Jubilee Christian Church in Nairobi illustrates the emergence of fictive kinship as a vital form of social capital. These constructed family-like bonds provide spiritual, emotional, and economic support, helping urban congregants navigate isolation and hardship—thus reaffirming churches as essential social safety nets. Mugambi extends this analysis by exploring how kinship terminologies ('dad' and 'mum') within Pentecostal churches function as indigenous agency in translating Christianity into African urban contexts. His research highlights how church leaders use familial language and relational frameworks to root religious identity in lived social realities, thereby shaping dynamic urban Christian communities. Mwangi's study of *Christ is the Answer Ministries* in Nairobi further shows how the Bible functions as a social organizational tool, mediating tensions between traditional extended family values and urban modernity. Pentecostal churches provide alternative social structures that foster cohesion and resilience amid the fractures caused by urbanization and capitalism. The final article in this section, Kioko's research on the Kenyatta University Christian Union, echoes the dynamic above by demonstrating that communality among diverse student groups is not static but contextually redefined. His application of social identity theory reveals how groups balance belonging and individuality, fostering adaptive and inclusive forms of communality amid cultural diversity.

The final two articles address educational inequality, as well as emerging religious identities and digital communities. Baloyi's South African study underscores how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed systemic inequalities within the education sector, particularly affecting previously disadvantaged communities. The pandemic's disruptions highlight the urgent need for Christian education to complement, or even replace, secular models in addressing gaps in access and quality. This call signals a broader concern for social justice and the transformative potential of faith-based education in mitigating educational inequities. Ndereba's digital ethnography examines the rise of 'Spiritual but not Religious' identities among Kenyan youth on social media, a phenomenon accelerated in the post-COVID context. His findings illustrate how digital networks facilitate a hybrid communalism that crosses religious and non-religious boundaries, offering new forms of belonging on the periphery of institutional Christianity. This emerging landscape challenges traditional religious scholarship to broaden its analytical lens toward non-traditional faith expressions and digital spiritualities.

Collectively, these studies illuminate the transformative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on African religious life, kinship, and social values. They reveal a dynamic interplay between disruption and adaptation, whether through digital innovation, reconfigured kinship, or evolving communal identities. African religious communities have demonstrated resilience by creatively renegotiating the boundaries of communality and spirituality in response to social, technological, and health crises. These articles affirm that African societies have not only endured the shock of the pandemic but have done so with scholarly creativity, cultural adaptability, and deep communal resilience. They show that the future of African religious life lies not in static preservation but in the continual reconfiguration of practices rooted in enduring values—values nourished by kinship, guided by faith, and shaped by memory. It is a future shaped by the enduring African conviction that life, in its fullness, is sustained through relationships—between the living, the departed, the divine, and the land.

These insights contribute significantly to understanding the future of faith, identity, and social cohesion in contemporary Africa, a continent whose religious and cultural resilience has been repeatedly tested and honed through successive crises, from the disruptions of colonization and Christianization to the epidemiological crucibles of Ebola, HIV/AIDS, and now COVID-19. Africa's adaptability posture is not merely reactive but deeply inventive, transforming imposed systems into hybridized lifeways that sustain communities while negotiating the paradoxes of modernity.

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