

“Unmasking” the Authenticity of the Values of Communality Post the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nomiya Church, Eastleigh

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Abstract

In Nomiya Church, African values of communality were redefined and reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. The advent and subsequent growth of the internet have prompted computer-mediated communication in all spheres of human life, including religion. This article examines the transition from physical to online church and how it has redefined African values in religious practices and worship, particularly in an African-instituted church, Nomiya Church, Eastleigh. Based on the religious ethnography undertaken over three years, the article utilizes African communalism theory to make sense of shifts and postures in African value systems. African communalism theory upholds togetherness and the common good, exhibiting the values of justice, care, and mutual existence, which are transient yet crucial pillars in light of social changes. This article argues that the COVID-19 pandemic unmasked the authentic core of African communality within the Nomiya Church, revealing that its deepest expressions of belonging, identity, and spiritual solidarity are intrinsically tied to physical presence. The shift to virtual spaces, while a necessary substitute, acted as a diagnostic tool that stripped away the nonessential, laying bare the irreducible elements of their communal life. Physical presence drives the formation of a collective identity, an enhanced sense of belonging, and interrelational solidarity, which is further strengthened by language, exemplified through shared values. African communality is thus not an inborn static philosophy/trait common to all Africans. Rather, it is a salient and transient value and framework of ethical decision-making worth cultivating for the common good of all.

Keywords

African communality; COVID-19; digital church; Nomiya; value

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected societies across the globe, disrupting traditional practices, social structures, and communal bonds. In Africa, social ordering and worldview are premised on oneness, where kinship and communality are deeply rooted in every facet of human life, including religion. African kinship constitutes the social backbone of the society upon which values such as communality, identity, resilience, and spirituality are grounded and find meaning (Mbiti 1970; Appiah 1992; Gyekye 2002). The pandemic prompted notable shifts in religious practices, experiences, and understanding of communal values (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, forced the closure of schools and churches. The closure of physical church services accelerated the adoption of online church services, where participants engaged in digital technology activities such as live streaming of services, virtual celebrations of the Eucharist, virtual Bible study meetings, and online giving. Religious adherents channeled their church offerings through mobile money transfer services, meaning giving was strictly monetary. In most churches in Africa, and Kenya in particular, offerings could be given in kind, such as fresh vegetables, eggs, and livestock. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this ingrained mode of offering in exchange for liquid cash. Despite these shifts, religious communities have shown remarkable resilience as they adapted their religious practices and reinterpreted communal values to combat the infectious coronavirus. The adaptability is demonstrated in the ingenious use of digital platforms and technology to sustain religious practices and communal bonds during the lockdown and social distancing periods (Adogame 2020; Sibanda et al. 2022). The shift to digitalizing church services through live streaming on different platforms, though previously embraced by Pentecostal and Charismatic churches before the pandemic, mainly as a trend in modernism and digitalization, was not a priority in some African Independent Churches (AIC) until the pandemic.

Whilst the AICs depict traditional (utilized loosely here as opposed to modernism) ways of worship, staying clear from the digitalization of religious materials and service broadcasting in its entirety, the pandemic forced most to rethink. To contextualize, the AICs were Indigenous counter-groups that decried the evasion of some significant aspects of the African Indigenous religious beliefs and practices by the Western Christian missionaries. The AICs also fought against colonialism and paternalism, which deterred many African Christian converts from church leadership. However, as Kealotswe (2014, 228) argues, ‘By the end of the 20th century, the AICs had spread all over Africa [...] [and] their growth was made possible by their inclusion of many aspects of African culture in the expressions of the Christian religion and its practices.’ Some of the ingrained traits include, but are not limited to, adherence to social values and customs that uphold social cohesion. Some outstanding aspects include blood kinship systems, communality values, ancestral veneration, spiritualized symbols, and rituals. Thus, the AICs became the expressions of African Christianity, blending Indigenous worldviews with Christian traits and practices. Of importance is that the AICs are independent of any ecclesial and financial support from foreign countries of missionary origin, but they embrace a self-sustaining model (Mwaura 2004). The financial ordering explains why most AICs do not depict the affluence that characterizes most African missionary-founded, Pentecostal, and charismatic churches. A component that explains their slow adoption of technology, which is usually costly to install.

Whilst it is interesting to consider whether the AIC’s failure to embrace digitalization before the pandemic is viewed as staying clear of Western influence or a lack of economic stability, this article limits itself to the value of communality as embraced by the first African independent church in Kenya, Nomiya Luo Church (hereafter, Nomiya Church [NC]). Nomiya Church (NC) is the first AIC in Kenya, founded by Johana Owalo (Sudhe et al.

2015). The founding date in literature conflicts with that of Sudhe and others (2015), who write that NC was founded in 1912, whereas archival data from the Kenya National Archives indicate that the church began in 1918. A letter from the District Commissioner’s Office in Central Kavirondo, Kisumu, dated August 9, 1938, records that the religion was ‘started by one Johana Owala in 1918,’ called initially the Nomiya Mission. The Nomiya Church Eastleigh elders confirmed that their church was established in 1912, although the colonialists and missionaries in Central Kavirondo did not recognize it as a church. Nonetheless, the dates fall within the timeline when the AICs continued to challenge missionary-led churches and their paternalistic leadership styles, which undermined African cultures. The church is predominantly led by Luo ethnic groups from western Kenya, including Nyanza and Siaya (Ndeda 2003; Opwapo 1981). However, the church has grown to welcome other ethnic groups, mainly through intermarriage.

The Nomiya Luo Church is a profoundly communal and tightly knit religious community characterized by a highly patriarchal structure that governs both its social hierarchy and pastoral leadership, emphasizing male authority and traditional Luo cultural values within its spiritual practices. The pandemic immensely disrupted the Nomiya Church’s close-knit communal posture and the embrace of Indigenous worldviews and values, forcing a rethink of its stance. The article examines the innovative appropriation of African communal values within virtual spaces in Nomiya Church to understand how the oldest AIC, with a closer relationship to indigenous religions, engages in the process of innovating communal values in virtual spaces. Qualitative data gathered during and after the pandemic are descriptively and thematically analyzed, guided by African communalism theory, to reveal the authenticity of the value of communality among the AICs during and after the disruption. To this end, I will first provide the context of the Nomiya Church, including its worldview, beliefs, and practices. Secondly, a brief overview of African communalism theory will follow, highlighting that indigenous African societies express communalism through their everyday social life, internalized values that prioritize the social or common good of the community, an appreciation of mutual obligations, a focus on caring for others, interdependence, and solidarity. Thirdly, a section on methodology and findings will follow, highlighting significant themes. Finally, a discussion follows, where major shifts are drawn, unmasking the authentic postures that the value of communality assumed during and after the pandemic, highlighting the community’s resilience in the virtual space.

Nomiya Church

Nomiya Church deeply adheres to Luo culture, reflecting an African reinterpretation of Christianity through indigenous Luo elements. For instance, the term Nomiya translates to ‘I was given’ in Dholuo. This signifies the founder’s divine call to establish a church. The Luo culture emphasizes communalism, ancestral reverence, and divine revelation, tenets woven into the making of the Nomiya church. The church’s worldview reflects an African reinterpretation and integration of Christian and Islamic teachings, asserting African agency in its religious beliefs and practices (Barrett 1968).

A letter from the Kenya National Archives, written by the District Commissioner in Central Kavirondo, Kisumu, dated August 9, 1938, records the central tenets of the cult: (1) belief in one God, meaning that the divinity of Christ is not accepted. According to Gwengi (2024), Owalo opined that Jesus was not of the same substance as God but was rather a prophet of God, like him. Owalo opposed the doctrine of the Trinity, explaining why the NC reads more of the Old Testament than the New Testament. The NC also believes in (2) total immersion in baptism, (3) male circumcision on the eighth day after birth, and (4) a plurality of wives up to four. Gwengi (2024) reports that Owalo was against monogamy, a European idea not biblical to him. Finally, the NC (5) claims to preach obedience to the government.

Apart from polygamy (permitted in Islam and among the Luo indigenous worldview), whose practice was found to be ambivalent, other practices, such as male circumcision on the eighth day and purity adherence for women when menstruating or after giving birth, are practiced to date, as well as other Luo customs, including communal worship and reverence for ancestors, albeit within a Christianized framework (Ogot 1967).

The integration and incorporation of Christian and Islamic worship practices into the Nomiya church is outstanding, with adorning white clothes while in worship and heavily marred with androcentric overtones. The church’s leadership is only male, from the bishop to the catechism, with women taking other support roles. The centrality of male leadership in Nomiya society and the church highlights a robust communal structure that underpins the well-being of the entire community. While African women theologians such as Oduyoye (2001) acknowledge that patriarchal structures were prevalent in many traditional societies, they also highlight the prominent spiritual leadership roles women often occupied. In contrast, within the NC, the influence of Islam and Christianity appears to have contributed to a marginalization of women’s religious authority.

African Communalism Theory

African communalism is a historical and socio-cultural philosophy that promotes shared lifestyles for the benefit of all. According to Etta and others (2016, 303), African communalism ‘promotes unity, togetherness, kinship, and cooperation’ in all spheres of human life. African social ordering has been communal, where the good of the society precedes the subjective good of the community’s sole member. The communal organizations are depicted in blood kinships, clans, and villages where the good of all is emphasized before pursuing personal good. Further, Etta et al. (2016, 302) ground the African worldview to depart from communalism with their assertion that ‘African philosophy, which is all-encompassing, is inbuilt in African communalism through which Indigenous Africans expressed communal feelings, worldviews, and moral and cultural values based on the close-knit relationship among their kith and kin within a socio-cultural setting.’ The overreliance on a moral and value-based approach anchored in the values of togetherness and the common good for all has led to the concept of ubuntu being conceptualized and utilized as a static moral ordering among Africans by the majority of scholars, such as John Mbiti, Kwame Gyekye, and Augustine Shutte, among others. Whilst this frame is pertinent, I lean more towards the transient nature of communalism, which recentres the subjective human person as holding an agentive power in ethical decision-making.

As such, African communalism theory upholds togetherness and the common good. It also embodies the values of justice, care, and mutual existence, which are transient yet crucial pillars in light of social changes. Balancing the three tenets of communalism prompts an internalized sensibility to care. In his book *The Philosopher of Our Time* (1992), Igwe endorses the principles of care and fellow feeling as the symbol of communalism. He argues that an authentic and adequate socio-political philosophy in Africa, under the impetus of communalism, is to ‘be your kin’s keeper,’ which embodies the values of care and mutual existence for all. The concern for others regarding their existence is the hallmark of African communalism—living for oneself yet prioritizing the well-being of others, on whom our thriving depends. It is an appreciation of webbed interconnectedness that nurtures oneness, a oneness that breeds justice. According to Ekei (2001, 2), all these ideologies fit together perfectly, since ‘justice in the context of communalism’ exhibits four postures: ‘justice as coexistence, justice as acceptance, justice as caring, and justice as concern.’

Oluwagbemi-Jacob (2014), while expounding communalism as a theory of justice in African culture, argues that communalism as justice follows three principles. They include the

principle of equality, the principle of need, and the principle of merit. Oluwagbemi-Jacob (2014, 249) opines, ‘The core concept of justice is the principle equality, [which] demands that the same amount of whatever we are sharing should be given to everyone if nothing relevant distinguishes the possible recipients.’ [The other principle of justice is that of need, which] ‘requires the society to meet people’s basic needs for food, clothing, and access to adequate medical care. The need principle often serves as a justification for not treating individuals equally’ [and finally is the principle of merit that] ‘requires someone to have acted in a way that elicited some treatment as a response. Under the merit principle of justice, a person may receive favorable or unfavorable treatment depending on what the person has done.’ This means that what one deserves, therefore, is a result of the actions for which one is responsible. Oluwagbemi-Jacob (2014, 249) rightly argues that ‘communalism, viewed from the perspective of justice, is compassion-based and to an extent right-based. It tends towards the welfare of individuals regardless of whether they merit it or not by their own efforts.’

Thus, a singularistic focus on African communalism theory, emphasizing togetherness and the common good, can be exploitative in contexts that require care, justice, mutual existence, and self-initiative values. People embrace subjective initiative values and cultivate values such as responsibility, subjectivity, and independence/autonomy in working toward communality. Communality, I argue, is the end result of multiple subjective ethical decisions where the person takes full responsibility for the consequences, most of which work for the good of all, self and community. This is not to argue that the subjective self must always serve the interests of the community. However, an appreciation of one’s agency in ethically deciding what contributes to the greater good is ultimately called for. An individual in the African sense is often understood in the collective ‘we’; ‘I am because you are’, and a ‘person is a person because of other persons.’ However, being a person goes beyond the physical presence and relational component, such as how one relates to others (Murove 2020). Being a person, I would argue, requires some level of positive partiality (selflessness) as a starting point for serving the community. Hence the biblical directive ‘love your neighbor as you love yourself’ (Mark 12:31). As the adage goes, one cannot pour from an empty cup. You cannot give what you do not have; thus, cultivating self-love and responsibility is a prerequisite to relationality and inclusivity, postures that communalism advances.

Such a posture of living has a high probability of yielding justifiable ethical outcomes, grounded in the values of togetherness, justice, care, and mutual existence for all, especially in disruptive circumstances and situations. Contemporary Africa continues to suffer from the impacts of imperial colonialism and capitalism that are centered around negative partialism (selfishness). As a frame of ethical thought, a high degree of partiality advances selfish interests, significantly resulting in inequalities. As a result, corruption and moral degeneration have become the norm, not primarily due to the aforementioned impacts, but also to other intersecting factors affecting the continent.

Individualistic tendencies that are selfishly driven, rather than selfless, threaten the ambiance of human-centered social relationships promised by communalism, a fact witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Inequalities, selfishness, injustices, and negative attitudes toward care emerged during the pandemic, thereby challenging the value of communality as church services transitioned to virtual spaces for live streaming. A digital divide, for instance, unearthed inequalities between churches, persons, and communities at large. The theory of African communalism is thus employed in this article as a flexible framework that is context-dependent and primarily determined by the moral agent (the subjective human person). While Abakare and Okeke (2021, 81) challenge African communalism as a theory, arguing that ‘Pan-Africanism communalism is still the fiction of the mind,’ this article leans on the transient state of togetherness, justice, care, and mutual existence as guided by the principles of equality, need, and merit as depicting a humane-centered and internalized sensibility to

argue for a responsible spirit of Luo communalism. The spirit of communalism foregrounds the philosophy of socio-polity that advocates for universal humanism beyond Africa, a concept they agree with. Thus, African communalism as a theory is not a universally inborn trait that ought to be evident in every African but rather a learned and internalized skill that embodies humanity guided by humane virtues. This understanding thus means that situations and circumstances, such as those prompted by COVID-19, would challenge a person’s ethical decision-making framework as they fight for or against solidarity and survival. As such, COVID-19 was a site of struggle for expressions of communalism, albeit in physical spaces. Blended ethnographic data gathered from NC Eastleigh, Nairobi, are analyzed in relation to the African communalism theory to argue for the situatedness and vitality of communalism in physical encounters.

Methodology

The data utilized in this article is drawn from broader research on the African value of communality and religious experiences amidst COVID-19, funded by the Nagel Institute. The study compared religious experiences in three diverse churches in Nairobi County: a mission-founded church, the *Presbyterian Church of East Africa*; a Pentecostal church, *Christ is the Answer Ministries* (CITAM); and an African independent church. The Nomiya church was purposefully selected since it is Kenya’s first African independent church to reach the capital city. As the study commenced during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, physical ethnography was impossible, prompting the researchers to incorporate virtual ethnography. This meant online searching for the NC’s presence in various virtual spaces, such as Facebook and YouTube. Nomiya Church Eastleigh (NCE) was thus purposely selected, as they had a presence in the virtual space, with a live Facebook page hosting their services. The Nomiya Church Eastleigh serves as the headquarters of the Nairobi diocese, which includes four parishes and eight churches. Of the eight NCs in the Nairobi Diocese, only NC Eastleigh (NCE) had started live streaming its services on Facebook. Follow-up phone calls to the pastors of the sampled NCs confirmed that they were not live-streaming their services virtually but rather adhering to social distancing guidelines and limiting services to a maximum of one hour, as per the Ministry of Health’s guidelines (Ministry of Health, 2020).

Broadly, physical and virtual ethnography was conducted at Nomiya Church Eastleigh to examine how the church adopted and appropriated virtual modes of operation when physical church worship was banned in Kenya during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article, however, focuses on unmasking the authenticity of the value of communality in virtual space. Researchers had to navigate data collection in a COVID-19 era, interacting with people while adhering to COVID-19 protocols and blending in the virtual spaces. Nomiya Church Eastleigh live-streamed its services online through the church’s Facebook page. In line with the nature of ethnography, we monitored the services and chats on the Facebook page, aiming to capture people’s experiences and document what transpired when the church remained online. The online church consisted of 12 members, mainly the youth. After posting the attached form on the NCE’s Facebook page, I explained my role as a researcher to the followers and introduced the questionnaire. The participation was anonymous and voluntary. The data collected by the research subjects through the questionnaire consists of 10 answers. Five questions had predetermined answers, and five questions were open-ended. Their questionnaires are coded as virtual adherents 1 to 12 for analysis purposes. The main focus of the questions was on online services during the pandemic and how they affected their sense of togetherness and community in both online and offline spaces. As part of this online church, I attended online worship services and monitored the chat conversations among members as the service progressed. This immersive approach enabled me to evaluate the digital environment myself and understand the potential pros and cons of such interactions (Dumont 2023).

More extended interviews with 10 church leaders, comprising eight males and two females, were conducted in person to supplement the online data. Given the limited number of church attendees during the pandemic, only 25 people attended the service when the interviews were conducted. The ten participants were conveniently and purposefully sampled, as all ten respondents had leadership roles in the church. The two women, apart from attending the service that day, had the role of collecting foodstuffs that were being dropped in the church compound to help needy families, a plea they had sent through their WhatsApp platform. Given the study’s broader concern with a comparative approach to understanding our own and others’ perspectives, the data focused on people’s behaviors and perceptions of virtual churches and how these impacted communality values. Data collection focused on gathering information about people’s sense of belonging and satisfaction with virtual spaces, compared to physical church services.

The Nomiya churches in Nairobi County are primarily found in informal settlements, indicating a middle-class and lower-cadre occupancy. This context presents challenges related to the ownership of smart gadgets, internet access, and limited technological knowledge. Nonetheless, Nomiya Church Eastleigh adopted and appropriated digital operation modes that necessitated blended ethnography (physical and virtual) to facilitate data collection on the authenticity of the value of communality in virtual spaces. Returning to the church’s Facebook page after COVID-19 provides a glimpse into the authenticity of the value of communality, especially within physical church services. ‘Going back’ to the ethnographic field post-pandemic is crucial in gleaning the ambivalence of communality in these divergent spaces and circumstances.

In-depth interviews with church members and clergy confirmed that the value of communality was possible in the virtual space, albeit with some limitations compared to physical church services. The lack of physical touch in virtual spaces, such as handshaking, hugging, and eating together, hindered the ‘warm’ experience of communality in these settings. The blended ethnographic approach, which compared the ‘before,’ ‘during,’ and ‘after’ periods of the pandemic, was crucial for unmasking the authentic value of communality. By observing the community under the duress of lockdown and then in its return to physical gathering, the research design allowed for a comparative analysis that revealed which elements of communality were flexible and which were non-negotiable.

‘Everything is Changing’: Communalism in the Virtual Spaces

This article endeavors to explore the experience of the value of communality during and after the heightening pandemic to argue for its authentic expression in physical spaces. As such, looking back to the times before the pandemic outbreak, the then-present lockdowns shifted physical meetings into virtual spaces, and the subsequent massive influx into physical worship post-pandemic is a posture addressed in this section. Several themes following this framework of past-present and post are analyzed to unmask the authenticity of the value of communality among NCE adherents. Major grounding traits that foster authentic communality in physical interactions are uncovered. They include de-distancing, collective identity observance, inter-relational welfare and exclusion due to the digital divide, poverty, rituals, relational disconnection, and disconnection from spiritual blessings.

1 De-Distancing as a Communal Value

The Nomiya church is dominated mainly by Dholuo speakers from Western Kenya. As such, its physical services were mostly conducted using the local language, although the sermon was translated into Kiswahili in most instances. The founder adopted Dholuo as the language of worship in protest against the Christian missionaries who were traveling through western

Kenya, luring them into abandoning their culture. According to the senior pastor, Dholuo is their doctrinal language of worship; however, the translation was prompted by the intermarriages that continue to occur within the Nomiya Church. He argued: ‘We must speak in our mother’s tongue [Dholuo]; that is our language of worship that our prophet left for us. But we also have to translate. The Nomiya church is no longer a one-tribe congregation but has, over the years, attracted members from other dialects in the country.’ (Senior Pastor – NCE, KII, in his 50s).

Although the minister’s words allude to the growth, expansion, and subsequent inclusion of other tribes into NC, adherence to the prophet’s dictates remains resilient. The Dholuo language remains historically a language of communication in the Nomiya church service, as it connects them to the roots of their founder, and ancestor, John Owalo. The use of the Dholuo language in virtual spaces is persistent, although most young people mix Dholuo and English in live chats. Reading chats in Dholuo on the Church’s Facebook page is shared, attesting to the importance of indigenous language as a binding factor in the value of communality.

Utilizing Heidegger’s (2010) concept of de-distancing, explicitly focusing on language, I argue that de-distancing is a communal value. Heidegger’s concept of de-distancing refers to the phenomenological way human beings overcome perceived distances by bringing things close physically and through meaning and engagement. For Heidegger, de-distancing is not merely about reducing spatial gaps but about how existence is structured by a sense of nearness shaped by care, concern, and practical involvement. Heidegger (2010) argues that human beings do not experience distance in a purely objective, measurable way. Instead, something becomes ‘close’ when it matters to us, even if it is physically far. De-distancing is thus tied to how we inhabit our world, tools, language, and culture, collapsing abstract distances into lived experience. A familiar path feels shorter; a meaningful ritual collapses time.

De-distancing, as enabled by using the indigenous language Dholuo to connect people in the diaspora with their ancestral worlds, becomes a communal value rooted in ancestral spirituality that symbolically shatters spatial and temporal divides. Through ritual invocations, prayers, and hymns in Dholuo, the NC bridged the gap between the visible and invisible realms, invoking ancestral presence. Language became more than mere communication; it became a spiritual force that collapsed the distance between the living and the ancestors, reinforcing communal bonds despite physical separation. By speaking in Dholuo, the NC dissolved the perceived boundaries between earthly suffering and celestial intervention, transforming isolation into an act of spiritual reconnection and collective resilience beyond physical presence.

According to Kithaka wa Mberia (2015a; 2015b), Indigenous languages go beyond a cultural phenomenon. He argues that Indigenous languages are important for cultural transmission, identity building, and value creation. Though sermons were translated to accommodate the other Dholuo non-speaking members of the NC, the other parts of the liturgy, such as the service program, songs sung, and the Bible reading, were done primarily in Dholuo. Whilst the senior pastor framed the use of the language in keeping with the founder’s will, the young people in the virtual space opined that it gave them a sense of belonging, not only to the NC but also as proud Luos. Adogame (2022, 31), while researching the Oza people in Southwest Nigeria to understand their indigenous religious, social, cultural, and political conceptualizations, argues that ‘language is a significant marker of indigeneity and cultural identity. Language as an expression of culture spans a tribe’s self-identity, [advances] claims to [indigenesness], [anchors] chains of collective memory and narratives of existence, presences, worldviews and cosmologies, and gendered identities as well as their historical, cultural, religious, social, economic, and political imaginaries.’ Orality in its

authentic form, especially of an indigenous language, becomes a medium for transferring authentic knowledge regarding one’s identity regarding ritual performances, the tribe’s philosophical and cosmological worldviews, spiritualities, and meaning-making concerning emerging technologies. Thus, the use of indigenous language for the NC had binding and memory-preserving elements of not only the Dholuo language but also a depiction of loyalty to the history of their founding father, John Owalo.

Speaking one’s indigenous language is not only a marker of one’s identity but also builds one’s self-esteem by actualizing a sense of belonging. Indigenous language use has psychological benefits, including enhanced self-respect, self-esteem, and confidence (Wa Mberia 2004; Vallentin 2019; Onyenankeya and Salawu 2019). They agree that speaking in one’s indigenous language equips one with social and linguistic resources that evoke an expression of one’s ethnic identity, ranging from one’s cultural heritage, which includes norms, values, attitudes, and behaviours. The African communalism theory requires groundedness regarding societal merit based on responsibility and behavior. Upright behavior emerges from adhering to moral values and norms, safeguarding the community’s well-being. Their knowledge, subsequent socialization, and adherence to them give one a resounding esteem to claim belonging and affiliation.

Approaching the embrace of indigenous language from a decolonial perspective affirms Ngugi wa Thiongo’s (1986) concept of ‘decolonizing the mind,’ as colonialists dismissed local languages as backward. As Wa Mberia rightly argues, ‘Colonialism battered the self-esteem of the colonized people and made them lose trust in themselves as well as in things local, thereby making them lose faith in their own capacity to innovate or come up with worthwhile ideas’ (Wa Mberia 2015a, 56). As a result, speaking English is often depicted as a mark of civilization and modernity, a perception that has dominated most Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. Thus, the shaming component in the use of Indigenous language is deconstructed in NC, where key religious components are socialized and internalized within a familiar and grounded environment.

As such, the use of Dholuo, the Indigenous language of the Luo people, binds them together into a single whole, a religious community that embraces their oneness through it. A similar usage and embrace of Dholuo were witnessed in the virtual Facebook chat spaces, where the youth greeted and commented on live-streamed services using their indigenous language. Though there were instances when English was used, a mix of both languages dominated the chat space. One respondent from the shared questionnaires, responding to the value of Dholuo in their worship, argued that it was their language of communicating with the divine. ‘It is how we have been strained to look for God [...] yes, using our mother tongue [...] that is how you can express worship better’ (Virtual adherent 5, Q, October 18, 2020). After the virus subsided, an influx of people returned to the physical church in NCE, and Dholuo continued as the language of worship. Hence, an authentic component of the value of communality. The pandemic unmasked Dholuo not merely as a language of communication but as the essential medium for authentic spiritual de-distancing. In the virtual space, its use maintained a thread of connection. Further, Dholuo’s full power to collapse spatial and ancestral divides was revealed to be dependent on the collective, embodied act of worship.

2 *Collective Identity Observance*

John Owalo, the founder of NC, interacted with Muslims during his formative years, explaining the assimilation of some Islamic practices in the NC community. At Nomiya Church, men wear long, white robes, while women wear white dresses and are encouraged to cover their heads during worship. The NC adopted Islamic prayer postures such as kneeling and prostration during worship (Oded 2000). Whilst this distinct dress code unifies the

adherents of NC, it also gives them an identity that many members felt was diluted when the services moved online. While the virtual church created alternative communities during the pandemic (Musili and Cheronoh 2022), it is blamed for destabilizing collective identity observance in multiple ways. First, it distorted their mode of dress while in worship. One church member explained, ‘Our worship is about chanting prayers together, observing purity and holiness, first of the heart, and dressing in white clothes. The Facebook church does not allow that; that is not Nomiya’ (NCE elder, about 50 years). The dress code is strictly adhered to in NC, as evidenced by the fact that even we, the researchers, had to wear white dresses and remove our shoes to enter the church. Consecrating the altar for worship requires a display of purity expressed in dress and bodily purity. While explaining the seriousness of purity in NC, one woman elder (KII, in her 60s) stated:

You can’t approach the altar in any colored dress like they are doing in FaceBook. No, you have to be in white to show that you are clean. Even when you are on periods [menstrating] or you have given birth you are not supposed to come to church [...] for men yes it is the same: no sleeping with your wife [having sex] from Friday to Sunday. You have to remain pure [...] if you do, the congregation will know [...] If you are reading the bible, you will keep on stammering, then we know [...] he is not clean. It goes both ways (NCE woman elder, KII, about 60 years).

The woman decried the disrespect the virtual church displayed to the altar. She did not denounce the viability of the virtual church, but the observance of one’s purity and that of the altar was a significant concern that the virtual space contravened. As such, creating sacred spaces is a spiritually internalized concept that goes beyond physicality to an inward consciousness of holiness. Nonetheless, the observance of purity, which would display oneness and togetherness, a homogeneity that the theory of African communalism advances, was missing in the virtual church in NCE.

Secondly, the virtual church created an intergenerational swerve of responsibilities, where young people in NCE dominated the streaming of live services and were often the majority in the virtual space. The NC church being patriarchal in nature, older men in leadership positions expressed attitudes of desperation as their incapacity threatened their power to navigate the digital posture. While the senior pastor and his elders embraced the virtual church, the fear that it would water down significant practices that bind the church together posed major concerns. The senior pastor (KII, in his 60s) asserted:

It is good that the youth are helping us old people to understand technology. But they need guidance. The youth nowadays change everything. I have observed them coming to church without the proper dress. We have to be keen on this. If the virtual church persists, they can even insist on being the owners, but we are planning to build a media house. The older people understand Nomiya Church [...] these [meaning the youth] we are training.

Even though the use of digital technology has been lauded as an avenue for youth mentorship through digital discipleship classes (Darmawan et al. 2024), since the majority of them have access to the internet in NCE, whilst appreciating the opportunity, it posed a threat to the patriarchal leaders. Nonetheless, their prompt to build a media house is a step towards embracing technology. A post-visit to the NCE church confirmed that they had built a media house through generous support from their listeners in the diaspora, an initiative that the church elders appreciated. The head of Sunday school in NCE (in his 40s), explained, ‘We didn’t know that our Facebook church is listened to across the world. We have good well-wishers online who have sent a lot of money to us to get digital equipment and livestream-quality services. People are happy to listen to Dholuo services out there.’ The digital virtual church ministered and continues to minister beyond borders, thus rekindling transnational religious ties.

Thirdly, the polygamous ordering among the NC adherents, an ordering that accords men power to control their families, was also reported to be threatened as wives took over the leadership in making home altars. ‘Whilst praying in the house is important, for women to read the Bible from home when they can be in their impure days is not suitable for them and the order of our church’, one NCE elder (in his 60s) opined. As such, COVID-19 was significant in redefining and destabilizing patriarchy in NCE, even if it was for a period. In the same vein, education is another parameter that can destabilize patriarchy in NC. As observed, an NCE female adherent who had completed her master’s studies in mass communication and was working at Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), one of the leading media houses in the country, was tasked with managing the media house and its programs. Thus, patriarchy is infallible, but it can be contested by human agency, given favorable conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic and education, in their capacity to force the congregation to adopt new approaches to gathering and modernization.

African communitarian theory advances a culturally inspired collective identity characterized by solidarity, sharing, caring, mutual interdependence, and complementarity. The NCE elders worried that the disintegrating forms of communities, created virtually devoid of cultural overtones, threatened the identity of the NC doctrines as they were organically conceived. The systemic structural ordering in the leadership and governance of the church became fluid as the youth dominated the virtual worship. However, the new ordering created and pointed to new and inclusive leadership models and being a church in a digital world. The influx to the physical church post-covid and ratifications emerging from the leadership team attest to the value of communality within physical spaces. Nonetheless, advances in preparedness were sighted in case of another emergency, with a running media house airing programs in Dholuo. The NC Eastleigh has built a media house where the church leaders are mandated to familiarize themselves with technology and also for the service of their adherents in the diaspora. The senior pastor reported receiving financial support from the diaspora community that connected with them virtually. He argued that ‘the Luo people outside the country in America and Europe were delighted to listen to our Dholuo sermons. It brought them closer to home, and they are supporting this project so we can continue ministering to them as we also learn.’ Thus, the move online unmasked the performative and fragile nature of patriarchal control, as power shifted to tech-savvy youth. More profoundly, it revealed that collective identity is not a static doctrine but an embodied practice. The community’s distress over casual dress and impure states online unmasked white robes and bodily purity as non-negotiable signifiers of authentic Nomiya identity.

The quest for a systematic and structured shared sense of belonging, purpose, and values within the NC takes precedence, opening up to a sense of community and belonging that goes beyond the physical presence to include virtual communities and virtual belonging, following Heidegger’s (2010) concept of de-distancing and Fester-Seeger’s (2024) human presencing. For Heidegger (2010), de-distancing has nothing to do with occupying a physical presence in space but rather an ontological understanding that one is in existence beyond time. This ideology creates space for oneness within a virtual space, as is qualified by Fester-Seeger’s (2024) concept of human presencing. Human presencing, she explains, entails ‘re-evoking one’s past encounters with other people as humanly presencing it is making present of an absent other’ (Fester-Seeger 2024, 1). Thus, the ontological conceptualization of availability despite the distance and the influence inferred by the concept of human presencing grounds a sense of belonging and agentic influence beyond the physical. Consequently, collective identity formation extends beyond a common goal characterized by solidarity and oneness, as seen in virtual communities, to depart from cultural kinships that provide structure, identity, origin, and a sense of belonging. The desire for a grounding identity creates the need to transcend one’s origin, time, space, and culture to recreate an authentic sense of communality.

The NC’s connection with the dictates of its founder, John Owalo, attests to a deeper connection beyond time and space, a concept that makes room for virtual communality as a reality.

3 *Interrelational Welfare*

The value of communality is embodied in the spiritualized desire to show solidarity in all the seasons of life. Across Africa, the rites of passage, including birth and naming, initiation, marriage, and death, are communal events that bring groups of people together, sharing gifts and emotional support depending on the rite. Any season that promotes the well-being of humanity is celebrated, and gifts are shared to further human well-being. Likewise, people unite in solidarity during calamities to prevent any impediment threatening their well-being. From natural calamities such as floods, wildfires, and climate change to pandemics such as HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and COVID-19, among others, it draws the entire globe together to look for solutions that would ensure solidarity and sustenance. The interrelational component is exhibited in various ways, including greetings through the shaking of hands, hugging, kissing, sharing gifts, and eating and drinking together, among others. Community welfare regimes draw their roots from relationships between and amongst blood kinships, clans, families, and geographical communities. Such orderings existed before the dawn of COVID-19.

During the pandemic, disruptions were evidenced as people grappled with the infectious virus and their quest to survive it. Some communal activities that foster solidarity were disrupted, while innovative ones were adopted within the virtual space. Nomiya Church utilized Facebook for social and spiritual nourishment and WhatsApp for contributions in cases of eventualities. Musili and Cheronoh (2022) observed that lifelong church-based WhatsApp welfare groups were formed for communication and solidarity during eventualities and even weddings. The WhatsApp groups for support have become the norm in Kenya in cases of death, weddings, and any other function that requires financial support.

Though people adhered to public health protocols of social distancing, most adherents felt that care and spiritual nourishment are beneficial where there is closeness and touch. One adherent asserted: ‘Social media kept people away from each other [...] people lacked food [...] they could not get it virtually [...] ehhh, you need to meet people, greet them, and talk about what you are going through [...] you know, and pray together. Online [...] no it’s better here [physical church].’ (NCE woman in her 40s) While WhatsApp groups facilitated monetary support, the pandemic unmasked the stark difference between virtual transactions and authentic welfare. The lament that ‘people lacked food [...] they could not get it virtually’ revealed that the core of communality is embodied solidarity, the handshake, the shared meal, and the physical presence that conveys care in a way digital communication cannot.

Whilst it is innovative to have virtual communities, it is evident that presence is crucial in experiencing authentic communality. However, the concept of ‘human presencing’ in experiencing the authentic value of communality is deeply rooted in African philosophical and sociological traditions. For instance, John Mbiti (1969) highlights the importance of communal rituals in African societies. He notes that rituals such as initiations, weddings, and funerals are incomplete without community members, as their participation validates and reinforces the group’s shared values. On the other hand, it is said that our departed ancestors continue to influence our moral lives even from afar. African scholars have long emphasized the importance of being physically and emotionally present in communal settings to foster genuine relationships, shared values, and collective well-being. In the same vein, the agentic presence, as expounded by Fester-Seeger (2024), is crucial for communality, as diaspora members, though not physically present, stamped their presence and a sense of belonging through their suggestions and funding for a media house. Presence in these contexts is, thus,

not passive but active, as it involves other forms of engagement that foster a sense of belonging, a shared responsibility, and a unified identity. Furthermore, this virtual belonging helps contest male hegemony and other oppressive and exclusionary tendencies that would have been reinforced by actual presence, which is essential for mutual understanding and connection, thereby strengthening the values of the common good, care, and solidarity, among others.

4 Exclusion

Further, according to Ramose (1999), *Ubuntu*, a correlate of the value of communality, is not an abstract concept but a lived experience that requires physical and emotional presence. Being present allows individuals to engage in dialogue, share experiences, and participate in rituals reinforcing communal bonds. This presence is not just physical but also emotional and spiritual, as it involves empathy, care, touch, listening, and shared responsibility.

While reflecting on the pandemic, Mbembe (2021) rightly argues that African communities demonstrated resilience by adapting traditional practices to virtual gatherings and communities to maintain a sense of presence. Although innovative, virtual communities are robust in providing community support networks and sustaining communal ties; however, they are often devoid of emotional connections. The emotional and spiritual presence of community members is more readily experienced within close proximity. Physical touch and relayed emotions are easily trusted to provide support, comfort, and hope. However, members felt excluded from each other and the daily happenings of the church life to which they were a party. Women in the NC Eastleigh narrated that only men congregated in the church, keeping the desired social distance of two meters, while women and children stayed indoors. Even though they understood it was for their safety, they lamented being left out in a crucial moment when they needed to experience God.

Another adherent complained of spiritual exclusion. She explained, ‘When you give your offering or tithe to the pastor through M-pesa [mobile money transfer], you are not tapping blessings from the pastor. I need to give and have my pastor touch my head so that I feel he has received my offering. That way, my life will be better.’ (NCE Woman, KII, in her 60s) Similarly, the bishop decried the exclusion that the digital church brought about to the congregation. The concerns centered on a lack of finances, limited technological expertise, inadequate internet access, and preparedness. He argued, ‘Digital church, I think, is for the youth. The young people who understand these phones, [...] yes, yes, technology, ooh, internet. And for those who have money for data (internet bundles). See, not every church was prepared for covid [...] we were not. The young people helped a lot [...] People online dress casually; they still keep their shoes on [...] This is not appropriate at all.’ (NCE Bishop, KII, in his 60s). In the same vein, a church elder desired physical meetings as he decried, ‘it’s not possible to chant prayers alone. It’s difficult, you know [...] the church service needs people to respond (liturgy). At times, there are four or eight [...] online [...] That is not church, you know; you miss many people.’ (NCE Elder, KII in his 50s). Such assertions are informed by looking back to the pandemic and comparing it to the present times when a blended mode of worship is possible. However, churches continue to encourage their members to return to in-person worship, opting for virtual live streaming only when they are away or physically unable to attend due to illness or other reasons.

The digital church unmasked a form of spiritual exclusion. The desire for the pastor’s physical touch when giving an offering revealed an authentic, embodied spiritual economy where blessing is transferred through physical presence. This laid bare the limitations of a monetized, virtual transaction and highlighted who was truly excluded when the community was not physically gathered. Nonetheless, the reality of a virtual church is undeniable, though

it is slowly shifting into an archival center for church services and sermons. The zeal with which church adherents have returned to physical worship, despite minimal attendance in virtual spaces, depicts the transient nature of communality as an experience and displays adaptability that underscores the enduring value of presence and touch in experiencing the African value of communality.

Technology has necessitated innovative modes of expressing communality and interaction not only in physical spaces but also in virtual spaces, across various contexts, and in diverse circumstances, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (Musili et al. 2023). However, tension ensues between remaining authentic to Indigenous concepts of communality and the increasing use of technology, particularly in the contexts of virtual and digital churches. Although technology offers new ways to connect, it challenges the indigenous notions of presence, solidarity, care, participation, and communal identity to a greater extent. Scholars such as Gyekye (1997), Kaunda (2020), and Wariboko (2021) agree that technology should be used to complement Indigenous values that hold a community together. Thus, to realize the success of digital and virtual churches in African Christianity, they must reflect the community's values and needs. Digital platforms should be utilized as tools designed to facilitate religious interaction, collective decision-making, and expedited feedback, thereby enacting a community-centered framework. Recognizing the change in time and seasons through technological advancements is critical, a component that Kevin Ndereba (2023, 103) envisions in his work, 'Digital ecclesiology and Africa's digital natives: prospects and challenges.' The inevitability of embracing the reality of virtual spaces and communities departs from the component of the presence of a generation he refers to as 'digital natives.'

From the foregoing, homogeneous culture as a mark of authenticity fails. The normative notion that culture is geographically and ritually centralized fails, as cultural groups have become more heterogeneous and diverse, as revealed by the pandemic. We were thus invited to adopt a de-essentialized notion of culture that is more open, allowing for changes and transformations in cultures where overlapping cultures and complex identities are present, as cultures are politically contested and contestable. COVID-19 birthed a Kairos moment, necessitating a social change that led to uncompromising assimilation into a new online church service practice, which in turn became a social and virtual reality. The moment called for adopting a new posture (virtual space) that was and remains crucial in undertaking the collection mission in light of the Great Commission 'Go ye' (Matthew 28:16–20). Thus, remaining true to God's mission and the advances of world Christianity as a field of study, virtual communality should be embraced beyond borders that embrace distinctiveness in context and values. Extending communality beyond the physical (Matthew 18:20, 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there') while upholding the values that uphold our oneness as humans as attested in Hebrews 10:25, 'Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing', is paramount.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the disruptive force of COVID-19 unmasked the authentic, embodied nature of communality in the Nomiya Church. It demonstrated that while technology can facilitate connection, the values of care, identity, and spiritual solidarity are most fully realized in physical co-presence. The pandemic did not destroy communality but rather stripped it down to its core, revealing what the community could and could not live without. The findings of this study, revealed through the 'unmasking' process, have significant implications for African communalism theory. They challenge the notion of communalism as an abstract, inborn philosophy. Instead, this case unmasks it as a fragile, practiced ethic that is authenticated through specific, embodied rituals and physical presence. It suggests that the theory must account for the conditions under which communality is authentically realized

versus merely performed, especially in an increasingly digital and disruptive world. In balancing, I suggest utilizing technology as a tool to incorporate and internalize relational, participatory, and embodied aspects of African communal life in the virtual and digital churches.

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Submission date: February 17, 2025

Acceptance date: May 11, 2025

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