

# Between Kinship and Individualism

## Reimagining Communality in

### Kenyatta University Christian Union

Stephen Kioko

#### Abstract

This study examines how communality is being reimagined within university Christian student organizations, focusing on the Kenyatta University Christian Union (KUCU). Against the backdrop of rapid technological change and shifting generational values, it explores how KUCU navigates the tension between traditional African communal philosophies and contemporary individualism. Historically, African societies fostered deep daily connections rooted in shared language, culture, and religion. In contrast, KUCU operates within a diverse academic environment, where students differ in ethnicity, faith, and discipline. Using Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT), which balances the human need for belonging and uniqueness, the study investigates KUCU's strategies for cultivating solidarity and inclusion. Employing ethnographic methods, including interviews, observations, and focus groups, it addresses three core questions: How does KUCU foster communality? What integrative practices support its diverse membership? And how does it draw from African communal traditions? The findings argue that communality within KUCU is dynamic and adaptive, reflecting a postmodern model of integration where individuality and collective identity are continuously negotiated.

#### Keywords

Contextual communality; dynamic communality; Kenya; university Christian communities

#### Introduction

The study of communality in postmodern African societies is an interesting enterprise. This is because, on one hand, the forces of capitalism with the concomitants of selfhood and individualism threaten not only the idea of but also the practice of collectivism. On the other hand, communalism and community, conceptually and in practice are being transformed from the traditional understanding and practice, to new adaptive mechanisms that fit this age. It becomes a more interesting enterprise in Africa because of the African philosophy of ontology. This philosophy is evident in the work of several African scholars, such as John

*Utambuzi: Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and its Diaspora* 8, no. 2 (2025): 98–110

Published on behalf of the African Association for the Study of Religions.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Mbiti (1969), Masolo Gyekye (1997), Masolo (2004), among others. Mbiti anchors the understanding of personhood in the primacy of the community. In this context, the primacy of the community takes centre stage, and the individual derives personhood from the community. This is summarized as Ubuntu philosophy with the axiom, ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’ (Mbiti 1969, 108). As Gathongo (2022, 4) notes, Mbiti did not at first use the term ‘Ubuntu’ in his work. He borrowed it from an African philosophy, especially from his Kamba-Bantu community. He stated that ‘Mundu ni mundu nundu wa andu’ (a person is a person through other persons). Mbiti’s ideas, drawn from African religion and culture, argued against individualism, especially as espoused in Western philosophy like that of Rene Descartes in favor of collectivism. The implication is that an individual is nothing outside the community.

The primacy of the community over the individual was initially evident in Temple’s work in 1959. Temple argued that the individual is inherently connected to his surrounding, which includes God, his family, his descendants, and even the land and everything else in it (Temple 1959, 66). Gyekye (1997), Masolo (2004), and Adeate (2023) pursue the same concept, referring to it as Afro-communitarianism, where individual existence cannot be explained except on the basis of the community. Gyekye (1997, 41) sees Afro-communitarianism as embedded in social relationships, and thus, one cannot think of individuals as isolated beings. While the above scholars rigorously outline the tenets of African communality with emphasis on the community, in the current postmodern world, two challenges emerge. One is the question of whether communality still exists as espoused in African religion and culture. The second question relates to the primacy of the community in a capitalistic age, which emphasizes individualism. This is the concern that Brewer (1991) raises in his ODT theory: the paradox of inclusion and differentiation.

Within this paradox, scholars, especially from sociology, have debated whether community/collectivism is under threat of extinction (Stein 1964; Lee and Newby 1983; Day 2006). The ‘prophecy’ about the loss or decline of communality is traced back to the emergence of modern society, characterized by experiences of industrialization and urbanization (Day 2006, 7). Urbanization and industrialization challenged the traditional aspects of feudalism, agrarian traditions, cultural contexts, and practices of solidarity. Zorbaugh (1983, 271) and Frankenberg (1966, 282) indicate that the more the society becomes urbanized, the more the elements of communality disappear.

All these changes are captured in the works of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, writing at the onset of modernity and its threat to the community (Day, 2006). But from a sociology of postmodernity stance, is community/collectivism actually dying out? William (1975), as quoted by Day, writing around fifty decades ago, disputes the notion that community is disappearing. Instead, he reasons that community ‘will be transformed into new kinds of awareness, increasingly detached from the limitations of particular places, neighborhoods, and experiences’ (Day 2006, 20). Santala and McGuirk (2022) share the same ideas about the revitalization of community in postmodern times. Writing during the COVID-19 disruptions, they note that even the crisis of the pandemic could not kill communityhood. Instead, people reorganized themselves in community-based contexts and embraced other ways of connecting and socializing, including the virtual space. Madden (2020) and Spade (2020) observe how digital platforms became the new opportunities for solidarity beyond traditional collectivism. This gave evidence of the community adapting (if not being adapted) and transforming to fit the changes and crisis of postmodernism.

The revitalization of community in postmodern times with its emphasis on individualism paradoxically is reaffirming the significance of community for humans. Nafstad and others (2013), affirming the centrality of humanity, argue that no human being can satisfactorily explain the foundation of his well-being solely on himself but rather on the dependence on the

‘care and civic virtues of others’. Batson (1991) and Peterson and Seligman (2004) locate the resilience of community in the social nature of humanity; that is, communality constitutes basically who human beings are. It is what Brewer (1997; Brewer et al. 2013), Brewer and Caporael (2006), and Caporael (1997) reiterate as the nature of human sociality, and that human beings are obligatory group-living species such that they cannot survive outside cooperative and interdependent groups. While in agreement that communality has persisted through the modern and postmodern times, it has also been challenged, resulting in changes and transformations. I argue that new ways of integrating individuals within the community are evident and worth investigating. But what are the threats of communality in this age?

Giddens (1991), Bauman (2000), Nafstad and others (2007; 2009b), and Stiglitz (2002) construe the capitalistic market ideology as the greatest threat to communality. They locate the danger in the neglect of humans as social and civic virtuous persons capable of empathy and concern for others and the common good. Batson (1991), Hoffman (2000), Nafstad (2005) in emphasizing the threats of capitalistic worldview on communality, observe that the emphasis on individualism naturally leads to egotism and self-gratification at the expense of ‘others’ in the society. While agreeing that communality has been challenged by the capitalistic worldview together with its strong concomitants, this article advocates that communality has neither ‘died out’ nor declined as espoused by proponents of capitalistic ideologies. Instead, borrowing from the ideas of William (1975 as quoted by Day, 2006; 20), the community is being transformed into new kinds of awareness. Traditional communal worldviews are transforming and adapting to fit in a postmodern technological space. Recognizing the diversities brought in by industrialization and urbanization (breaking of the traditional definitions of neighborhood and communality), new ways of forming communities have emerged, borrowing from the traditional ones, modifying and adapting mechanisms taking place; nevertheless, the existence of communality is evident. This becomes the focus of an integrated community.

Although communality has continued in postmodernity, the intellectual debate about the primacy of the community over the individual persists. This explains why, in discussing the resilience of communality with the dynamic and adaptive mechanisms in the age of multiple diversity, the article also appropriates the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT), where the need for inclusion and differentiation paradoxically work together in social relationships (Brewer 1991). This explains why, in a postmodern age, it’s possible for communality to exist without engulfing the individual, even in a global space.

This article argues that communality is not static but dynamic and transient in a way that acknowledges people’s diversity. It advances the concept of integrated communality that unites diverse subjects and groups around shared goals that can be paramount to the wellbeing of societies. With respect to KUCU, it affirms that despite the presence of postmodern anti-community challenges, university students, borrowing from their traditional communal worldviews and mixing them with biblical principles about the family, have appropriated new ways of creating community. The discussions are evidence of how KUCU transforms and creatively adapts African communal aspects into modern forms and practices of communality within a community of believers from diverse ethnic backgrounds and academic disciplines.

## **Methodology**

This study employed an ethnographic approach, enabling sustained engagement with the field over an eight-month period. Data collection methods included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, allowing for a rich, contextual understanding of communal practices within the Kenyatta University Christian Union (KUCU).

Sampling combined purposive and snowball techniques. KUCU, with a membership exceeding 3,000 (KUCU records), provided a diverse pool of participants. From the 15-member executive board, 11 individuals were purposively selected for interviews. These included the chairperson, organizing secretary, eight departmental coordinators (worship, evangelism, prayer, discipleship, social welfare, creative arts, information, and communication), and a Short-Term Experience in Ministry (STEM) staff member seconded by the Fellowship of Christian Unions-Kenya (FOCUS).

The chairperson, organizing secretary, and STEM staff were interviewed to explore KUCU's leadership structure, programmatic design, and strategies for integrating members across academic disciplines. The eight coordinators provided insight into the role of their respective departments, the processes by which members are recruited, and how these subgroups contribute to the broader communal ethos of KUCU.

To deepen this understanding, focus group discussions were conducted with members from each of the eight departments. Each group comprised no more than six participants. Group secretaries were purposively selected, while remaining participants were identified through snowball sampling, with a preference for third- and fourth-year students who had been active in KUCU for at least three years. This ensured that participants had substantial familiarity with KUCU's programs and internal dynamics.

In total, 67 respondents participated in the study, offering a multi-layered perspective on how communality is enacted, negotiated, and sustained within KUCU's diverse and evolving membership.

### **KUCU: The Integrating Family**

Established in the 1980s, the Kenyatta University Christian Union (KUCU) is organized as a family of families—a structure that fosters integration, belonging, and sustained communal engagement among university students (David, 2024). This familial posture enables KUCU to absorb new members seamlessly while maintaining a cohesive community. Over eight months of ethnographic observation, a recurring phrase emerged during worship services: 'By the grace of God, I am from this family'—a reference to departmental groupings such as the Discipleship Family or Evangelism Family. This ritualized self-identification reflects KUCU's deep-rooted family orientation.

The concept of family is foundational to African communality. Afro-communitarianism, as articulated by Mbiti (1970), situates the individual within a spiritual and social web that includes the living, the living-dead, and the ancestors. Kinship is not merely biological but theological, shaping both social identity and religious interpretation. Nyamiti (1984), in *Christ as Our Ancestor*, reimagines Jesus as a 'Brother-Ancestor,' drawing on African kinship systems to interpret Christ's mediating role. Oborji (2020) expands this analogy, suggesting a form of ancestral kinship within the Trinity: the Father as ancestor, the Son as descendant, and the Holy Spirit as the relational bond. Through incarnation, Christ assumes human flesh and symbolically occupies the role of ancestor, bridging humanity and divinity (Oborji, 2020). While Nyamiti's theology invites debate, it underscores the centrality of family in African religious thought.

This paper argues that African collectivism—anchored in familial structures—resonates deeply with Christian communal principles. Despite the rise of individualism driven by capitalist ideologies, Christianity in Africa continues to thrive through its cultural alignment with communal values. As Walls (1982) observes, Christianity takes root in the culture it inhabits. KUCU exemplifies this synthesis: although situated within a modern academic

institution, its members interpret their faith through the lens of African cultural and religious traditions.

The language and practice of family within KUCU are not incidental but constitutive. McGill (2011) affirms that identity in Africa is forged through familial connections, while McCall (1995) highlights how village compounds embody the enduring value of family. Yet, KUCU operates in an urbanized, diverse setting—raising questions about how familial ideals are sustained outside traditional spatial arrangements. Although McCall’s work does not address urban contexts, KUCU’s adaptation of family language suggests a deliberate effort to preserve communal ethos.

Biblical models of Christian community further reinforce this orientation. In Acts 2, early believers practiced radical collectivism, sharing resources to support one another. Taylor (2001) contends that true knowledge of Christ emerges when individualism gives way to communal attraction—a view that aligns with African understandings of relational identity. Sakai (2017) similarly emphasizes the family as a universal source of selfhood and growth. McGill (2011) notes that even death does not sever African family ties, underscoring the depth of interdependence.

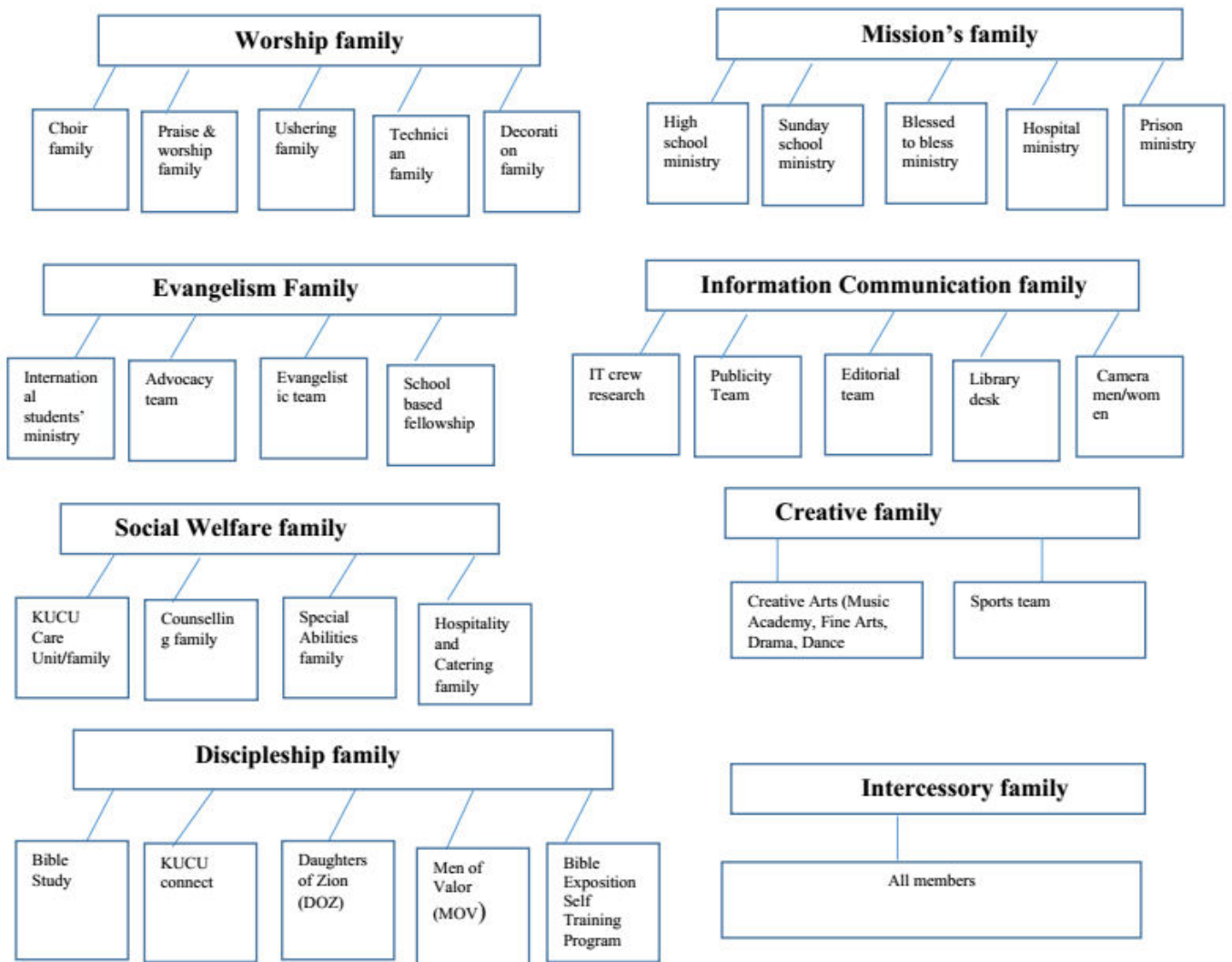
KUCU’s organizational structure reflects this ethos. Ethnographic data revealed that during worship sessions, members consistently introduced themselves by naming their KUCU family and academic discipline—e.g., ‘I come from the Choir Family, and I study Engineering.’ This practice affirms both spiritual and academic identity within a communal framework. KUCU comprises 48 families, formerly known as committees, renamed to reinforce the union’s communal character. These families serve as entry points for individual engagement and as platforms for service within the broader KUCU community.

In sum, KUCU’s family-based structure is not merely administrative—it is theological, cultural, and strategic. It embodies African collectivism, aligns with biblical principles, and offers a resilient model of communality in a postmodern, individualistic world. This raises critical questions: How is family ideology enacted in KUCU’s daily life? How does KUCU integrate diverse members into one cohesive body? And how does this emerging community resist the pull of individualism while sustaining collective identity?

At the apex of KUCU’s organizational structure is the executive board, led by a chairperson and composed of representatives from each of the eight ministry families. This leadership model reflects KUCU’s commitment to communal governance while raising a critical question: How does KUCU foster communality in a context marked by diversity, ensuring that individual uniqueness is respected within a collective framework?

The eight ministry families—Worship, Missions, Evangelism, Information and Communication, Welfare, Discipleship, and Creative Arts—serve as both spiritual homes and platforms for service. Each family functions as a close-knit community where members are nurtured, connected, and empowered to minister within KUCU and beyond. This structure allows individuals to align with areas that reflect their interests and talents, creating meaningful sub-communities that reinforce belonging.

Within each ministry family are smaller cell groups or subfamilies. For instance, members of the Worship Family may join the choir, praise and worship team, ushering group, or decoration unit, depending on their gifts and preferences. This layered structure mirrors African kinship systems, where nuclear and extended families coexist, offering both intimacy and broader communal ties. Even in a postmodern context that privileges individualism, KUCU’s model demonstrates how individuals can find immediate relational support while remaining part of a larger, interconnected body.



A particularly compelling example of KUCU’s integrative ethos is KUCU Connect—a weekly Bible study held every Monday from 7 to 9 p.m. Open to all members regardless of ministry affiliation, KUCU Connect is regarded as the union’s central communal gathering. One leader emphasized its importance by saying, ‘You better miss in the other families but never miss KUCU Connect [...] this is the most important family [...] you must be connected.’ At the start of each semester, members gather in the main hall (NZ39) to form Bible study groups. The process is simple: newcomers and regulars alike are welcomed into any group of their choosing, instantly becoming part of a spiritual family for the semester. During fieldwork, I joined a group, was warmly received, and added to its WhatsApp thread—an immediate demonstration of KUCU’s inclusive integration practices.

This communal infrastructure also enables responsive care. If a member of a subfamily faces hardship, their immediate group provides support and may coordinate with the Welfare Family for additional assistance. This interdependence was evident in campaigns like Comrade Asilale Njaa (‘Let no comrade sleep hungry’), which addressed student food insecurity. The Welfare Family mobilized resources to support affected members, reinforcing KUCU’s ethos of collective responsibility.

Importantly, KUCU's families are organized around ministry rather than academic discipline, ethnicity, or year of study. This intentional design fosters cross-cutting relationships and ensures that every member finds a place to belong—not through demographic similarity, but through shared purpose and spiritual commitment. KUCU's structure thus exemplifies how African communal values can be recontextualized to thrive within a diverse, urban university setting.

### **Gender-Delineated Subfamilies**

Another integrative feature within the structure is the incorporation of gender-focused ministries. A notable example is the establishment of the Daughters of Zion (DoZ) and Men of Valor (MoV) subgroups within the discipleship family. These models are adapted from Neo-Pentecostal frameworks, particularly those of Jubilee Christian Church, founded by the late Bishop Allan Kiuna. What is particularly significant, however, is how these ministries foster gender-specific communities—DoZ for female students and MoV for male students. This arrangement mirrors traditional African, especially Kenyan, societal practices, where men and women often participated in gender-specific gatherings and associations. In an interview with some of the members of these groups, it was indicated that, 'there are moments when we need to talk about men-related or women-related issues, and therefore the separate groups. For example, how will you teach a man how to be a man in the presence of women?'

In this context, issues related to femininity and masculinity are addressed through a biblical lens, thereby integrating members in a manner that aligns with socio-cultural norms. Further, this was in agreement with ODT theory that the need for inclusion and differentiation paradoxically work together. While the KUCU integrated family values for both men and women, it does not do away with gender-specific aspects; hence, DoZ and MoV were formed. In addition, these gender-delineated subfamilies give evidence of the adaptation of communal structures from traditional to contemporary settings. This is reminiscent of African cultural settings in which men and women would have their specific groupings for gendered issues. As a result, this study confirms the argument that communalism does not disappear in modern society but rather evolves into new forms of social consciousness, increasingly distinct from their traditional origins.

### **Ministry Giftedness and Integration**

Another integrative feature is the aspect of bringing together members of the same areas of ministry giftedness and talents. For example, the mission family invites those it believes are gifted towards outreach ministries. This family itself is further divided into smaller groups of those gifted in high school ministry, prisons, hospitals, and the related ministries. The same is true of the creative ministry that fuses together anyone with interests in drama, dancing, and fine arts that are useful in not only making the services colourful but also more interesting for the whole KUCU family. The same feature is repeated in all the families and subfamilies. A good example is the creative family with members gifted in drama and aspects of theatre arts. In every midweek service or Sunday service I visited, this group would make the service very interesting through their dance and general performance. In addition, another family would transform the meeting hall from a class setup to a sanctuary by beautifying of the auditorium. All these were visible elements of both integration and differentiation at work and thus a display of integration at in a university context.

### **Ethnic/Regional Evangelistic Teams**

Another interesting aspect of assimilation within the larger KUCU family is the presence of evangelistic teams as found in the Evangelistic family. The ethnographic sessions revealed that these evangelistic teams were dominantly ethnic, either as expressed by their names and or composition of the membership. The interviews revealed that some of the evangelistic groups are the Ukambani Evangelistic Team, North Rift Evangelistic Team, Kisii Evangelistic Ministry, and the Mount Kenya East Evangelistic Team. Judging by their names, these evangelistic teams meet the needs of defined ethnic groups. This is another interesting case of the dynamics of contextual communality borrowing from traditional contexts. In Kenyan traditions, besides the nuclear and extended family, ethnic and tribal identity are critically important to individuals. The sense of belonging and interconnectedness experienced by students is often rooted in shared language, cultural practices, and geographical identity. Transitioning to university life, however, displaces students from their familiar ethnic and tribal contexts, immersing them in a diverse and multicultural environment. In such settings, encountering peers from similar ethnic or tribal backgrounds can foster a renewed orientation toward one's own group. This phenomenon aligns with what Tajfel and Turner (1979, 25) describe as 'in-group favoritism'—the widespread tendency for individuals to show preferential treatment toward members of their own group over those from others. This ethnic and tribal orientation deepens students' sense of identity and inclusion within their cultural group. KUCU accommodates this dynamic by structuring its community in a way that allows for ethnic and tribal affiliation without undermining the broader communal unity. This approach exemplifies how traditional communal values are being reimagined and sustained within contemporary, postmodern contexts, supporting the view that communalism persists not by disappearing, but by evolving into new, differentiated forms of social cohesion.

KUCU as an integrating family validates the ODT's aspect of assimilation. According to Brewer (1991), the need for assimilation and inclusion is natural in human beings. Tutu has the same reasoning that 'we need other human beings in order to be human' (Tutu 2009, 25). Therefore, it is evident that KUCU embraces dynamic strategies embodied in a family orientation with adaptations from the traditional African communal ideologies and practices and integrates its diverse membership into one inclusive community—the KUCU family. However, Brewer (1991) notes that besides the need for inclusion and assimilation, there is also the paradoxical need for differentiation from others. The differentiation component is discussed below.

### **KUCU: The Differentiating Family**

Brewer (1991) reminds us that as the need for assimilation is met by the social groups, the need for differentiation is activated. The two paradoxical domains keep each other in check such that none is sacrificed for the other. Differentiation, just like assimilation, plays a pivotal role in communality. It is crucial to infer from ODT that if the individual loses the 'individualness' or 'individuality' and becomes immersed in the social group, then the group itself loses its sense of communality. Communality is communality when individuals bring their sense of individualism into the group such that their uniqueness makes the group thrive, as depicted by the sacrifices they make for the group but at the same time not losing their individualism. KUCU preserves this differentiation in different ways.

*Differentiated ministries.* As discussed earlier, KUCU is organized as a family structure of eight families grouped into forty-eight sub-families. While it was observed that the families are also organized as ministries assimilating each individual, the ministries are not just one common pool but different to accommodate both the individuality and diversity of the

members. To safeguard individuality, members choose the ministry they want to belong to. The individual begins and continues to play a unique role in the specific sub-community and, by extension, the large KUCU family. Furthermore, the differentiated ministries also care for the different areas of giftedness, talents, and abilities.

While assimilation is evident in grouping similar ministries and sub-ministries together, diversity is seen in the manner in which the families are crafted. An observer can easily note the biblical aspect of unity in diversity (Ephesians 4:1-7). Drawing from a biblical teaching that Christ's gifts are spiritual gifts differently apportioned for serving the entire Christian body, KUCU dynamically embraces that. In addition, the ministries of worship differ from those of discipleship and those of evangelism and creative arts, among others. The diversity is further reflected in the subgroups. Even though all might be gifted in missions, not everyone will go to high school ministry or hospital ministry, but members join activities that they believe they are gifted in. The creative arts and information families focus on talent. This is because not everyone is talented in sports, dancing, or information technology, especially in photography and artwork. So while the individual is assimilated into a large family, his/her individuality is not lost, thus increasing the sense of collectivism as seen in diversity. This kind of balancing is what is reflected in ODT theory, that collectivism and individuality work hand in hand.

*Differentiated in gender (sex?).* It has already been observed that part of the inclusion strategy is the gendered approach to programs that minister to men and women separately. However, despite catering for the need for inclusion, it was observed that this also met the need for individualism. While all the KUCU members are joined in the one body of Christ, joined in one universit community and in one union, they are still differentiated by their femaleness and maleness. The existence of DoZ and MoV as distinct families speaks of the differentiated needs of females and males, which must be met, though in a social group. For example, in attending MoV sessions, one of the topics was what it means to be a man. Indeed, one could directly see the borrowing from the traditional society since the same question was asked and answered. However, the answers given to the question were now influenced by biblical teaching, making them different from normative traditional approaches. Nevertheless, the distinction between maleness and femaleness is retained.

*Differentiated in academic disciplines.* KUCU is domiciled in Kenyatta University, a vast learning institution with multiple faculties and diverse disciplines. KUCU membership spans the diverse disciplines of the university. On Wednesday and Sunday worship services, anyone tasked with leading the service or part of the service, besides mentioning his or her name, proudly mentions his or her academic discipline. Whenever a certain academic discipline or faculty is mentioned, the rest of the members ululate to show solidarity. This is another means of retaining individuality, such that despite an immersion in one group, the distinctiveness of one's profession and/or career remains.

*Differentiated in ethnic/tribal and citizenship.* While ethnicity and tribal affiliation were discussed as points of inclusion, they are also avenues of differentiation. One, despite Kenya being highly ethnic with elements of negative ethnicity expressing themselves in public domains, KUCU appreciates the different ethnicities and aspires towards inclusivity. This is reflected in various ways. One, some of the songs during worship services are in the mother tongue, and members of those communities are encouraged to show dancing styles from their communities. This ensures that in the midst of a community of approximately 3000 members, an individual finds opportunities to celebrate their ethnic distinctiveness.

Two, as found in the discipleship family, in the subfamily of the evangelistic team – the teams are formed on an ethnic/tribal basis<sup>1</sup>, for example, for the Kamba, the Kisii, the Kikuyu, and the Kalenjini, among others. While the individual finds assimilation within his/her community in the larger community of KUCU, he/she finds differentiations as a member of a certain ethnic group but still without threatening the collective. Further, besides ethnic orientation, citizenship orientation is also important. In the discipleship family, there is a subfamily of international students. Students from other countries can have their time of meeting and fellowship and embrace communality. While assimilated into the larger KUCU family, they also find their different nationalities are recognized. This is a classic example of how ODT manages both assimilation and differentiation while preserving communality.

## **Conclusion**

Aristotle's assertion that 'man is by nature a social animal' (Politics, Book I, 1253a) remains profoundly relevant. He argued that society precedes the individual, and those who reject communal life are either subhuman or divine—outside the bounds of ordinary human experience. Across history, from agrarian and feudal societies to industrialization, urbanization, and the complexities of postmodern life, this foundational truth has endured: human beings seek connection, belonging, and shared purpose.

Contrary to capitalist predictions that individualism would eventually eclipse communal life, communality has not disappeared—it has evolved. While traditional forms of community have faced disruption, they have also adapted to new social realities, including digital and virtual spaces. This study, guided by Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT), reveals how communality persists in dynamic and context-specific ways within the Kenyatta University Christian Union (KUCU).

Ethnographic findings show that KUCU functions as a large, interconnected family, drawing on African communal ideals to foster both unity and individuality. The union is structured into eight ministry families, each comprising multiple sub-families—forty-eight in total. This layered organization enables members to find belonging while pursuing their unique interests and talents. Ministry families are formed around shared passions (e.g., worship, evangelism, discipleship), allowing subcommunities to emerge organically. These subgroups strengthen bonds and facilitate meaningful participation.

Importantly, KUCU's structure balances integration with differentiation. While the collective identity is emphasized, individual members are not subsumed by the whole. Instead, they are recognized and valued for their distinct contributions. This dual emphasis reflects a reimagined communality—one that resists postmodern individualism by anchoring identity in both personal agency and shared purpose.

In conclusion, KUCU exemplifies how communal life can be sustained and revitalized in contemporary contexts. Its family-based model demonstrates that communality is not a relic of the past but a living, adaptive force—capable of thriving even within the fluid, fragmented landscapes of modern society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Although a close scrutiny shows that one can join a group outside his or her ethnic orientation, largely the groups are basically ethnic. They ensure that the students plan for evangelism to reach their own communities with the gospel.

### **Acknowledgement**

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Stellenbosch University for granting him access to its library resources as a research fellow.

---

**Stephen Kioko** is Lecturer at Kiriri Women's University of Science and Technology, a research fellow at University of Stellenbosch, and Member of African Association for Study of Religions (AASR) with research interests in religion and society. E-mail: stephekioko@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-6377-946X.

---

Submission date: March 10, 2025

Acceptance date: July 19, 2025

## REFERENCES

- Batson, C. Daniel. 1991. *The Altruism Question: Toward A Social-Psychological Answer*. Psychology Press.
- Brewer, Marilynn B. 1991. “The Social Self: On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time.” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 17: 475–82.
- . 1997. “On the social origins of human nature.” In *The Message of Social Psychology: Perspectives on Mind in Society*, edited by S. A. Haslam and C. McGarty. Blackwell.
- Brewer, Marilynn B., and Linnda R. Caporael. 2013. “An Evolutionary Perspective on Social Identity: Revisiting Groups.” In *Evolution and Social Psychology*, edited by Mark Schaller, Jeffrey A. Simpson, and Douglas T. Kenrick. Psychology Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203782965>.
- Caporael, Linnda R. 1997. “The Evolution of Truly Social Cognition: The Core Configurations Model.” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 1 (4): 276–98.
- Frankenberg, Ronald. 1966. *Communities in Britain: Social Life in Town and Country*. Penguin Books.
- Gathogo, Julius Mutugi. 2008. “African Philosophy as Expressed in the Concepts of Hospitality and ‘Ubuntu.’” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 130 : 39–53.
- . 2022. “John Mbiti’s Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 48 (2). <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/10292>.
- Gyekye, Kwame. 1997. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195112252.001.0001>.
- Hogg, Michael A., and Dominic Ed Abrams. 1993. *Group Motivation: Social Psychological Perspectives*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Lee, David, and Howard Newby. 2012. *The Problem of Sociology*. Routledge.
- Leonard, Carolyn. 1964. *A Critical Evaluation of Maurice Stein's Theory of Community Development*. Loyola University of Chicago.
- Mbiti, John S. 1970. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann.
- McGill, Caitlin. 2011. “Culture, Missions, and Africa’s Lessons for Western Christianity.” In *Jesus and Ubuntu: Exploring the Social Impact of Christianity in Africa*, edited by Mwenda Ntarangwi. Africa World Press.
- Nyamiti, Charles. 1984. “Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective.” Mambo Occasional Papers—Missio-Pastoral Series no. 11.

Oborji, Francis Anekwe. 2020. "Charles Nyamiti: Legendary Pioneer African Theologian." *Ministerium: A Journal of Contextual Theology* 6 (2020): 74–84.

Peterson, Christopher, and Martin E. P. Seligman. 2004. *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. Vol. 1. Oxford University Press.

Stein, M. 1964. *The Eclipse of Community*. Harper and Row.

Tajfel, Henri, and John Turner. 1979. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

Tutu, Desmond. 2009. *No Future Without Forgiveness: A Personal Overview of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. PRH Christian Publishing.

Walls, Andrew F. 1982. "The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture." *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 10 (3): 93–105.

Williams, Raymond. 1975. *The Country and the City*. Oxford University Press.

Zorbaugh, Harvey W. 1983. *The Gold Coast and the Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago's Near North Side*. The University of Chicago Press.