



The Concept of Community in African Cosmogony: Analyzing Its Implications for 21st Century Global World Order



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KEYWORDS

African cosmogony,
Communalism,
Global ethics,
Ubuntu philosophy,
Decoloniality.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the African concept of community through the lens of cosmogony, positioning it as a critical philosophical and ethical framework for reimagining global cooperation, sustainability, and peace in the 21st-century world order. The data that was used to advance this argument was generated from secondary sources. The data was analyze using the discuss analysis. It foregrounds the unique relational ontology embedded in African traditions marked by communal interconnectedness, ancestral reverence, and harmony with nature and contrasts these with the dominant paradigms of Western individualism and liberal modernity. Drawing on recent scholarly engagements with African philosophy, postcolonial thought, and global ethics, the paper interrogates the limitations of current hegemonic structures while proposing African communalism as a viable model for addressing contemporary crises such as inequality, environmental degradation, migration, and fractured global solidarities. By highlighting case studies like Rwanda's post-genocide reconciliation through *ubuntu* and ecological justice among Kenya's Ogiek community, the work affirms the relevance of indigenous African worldviews in shaping a more inclusive, pluriversal global order.

CITATION

Akuva, I. I., & Koko, J. C. (2025). The Concept of Community in African Cosmogony: Analyzing Its Implications for 21st Century Global World Order. *FUDMA Journal of Humanities, Social Science and Creative Arts*, 1(AHBSI), 46-52. [https://doi.org/10.70882/fujohssaca.2025.v1\(AHBSI\).6](https://doi.org/10.70882/fujohssaca.2025.v1(AHBSI).6)

INTRODUCTION

The marginalization of African indigenous worldviews within global intellectual and policy discourses remains one of the enduring legacies of colonial modernity. Despite the continent's rich philosophical traditions and its deep cosmological engagement with concepts such as community, relationality, and ethical order, dominant narratives of globalization have privileged Western epistemologies rooted in individualism, rationalism, scientism and anthropocentrism. Arguably, this asymmetry has not only undermined the richness of Africa's contribution to global ethics but has also contributed to a world order characterized by strong

western influences, cultural alienation, isolationism, and social fragmentation.

African cosmogony offers a markedly different vision - one in which existence is defined not by separation, isolationism, or individualism but by connection; not by competition but by communion. The African understanding of community transcends sociological categorizations; it is a metaphysical orientation that integrates the living, the ancestors, the unborn, nature, and the divine into a single, morally infused order. As contemporary scholars argue, such a worldview resists the atomization of the self and promotes a holistic ethic centered on reciprocity, responsibility, and sustainability (Ramose, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

In light of the 21st-century's most pressing global challenges - ranging from climate breakdown and forced migration to political polarization and epistemic injustices; this paper argues for a critical engagement with African communal thought. A concept well captured in the popular African parlance - *I am because We Are*. It posits that African cosmogonic visions, particularly, its concept of community and eco-relationality, provide foundational insights for rethinking international relations, conflict resolution, environmental stewardship, cosmopolitical justice and world peace. The task is both reconstructive and decolonial. It is not merely to add African voices to existing frameworks, but to unearth African philosophies as transformative alternatives, capable of guiding a more just and interconnected world, that is devoid of wars and the increasing isolationist tendencies.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

A General Theoretical Conceptualization of Community

The concept of "community" is a foundational yet multifaceted term that spans across all languages and articulated in various fields of human endeavours namely sociology, philosophy, anthropology, and religious studies. At its core, community denotes a group of individuals who share common culture, values, norms, identity, or location and engage in sustained relationships with one another. However, its theoretical conceptualization requires an unpacking of its semantic, sociocultural, and metaphysical dimensions.

From a sociological standpoint, the term "community" has historically been defined in contrast to "society." Ferdinand Tönnies' seminal dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) distinguishes traditional, kinship-based communities from impersonal, modern associations (Tönnies, 2001). While Tönnies' theory remains influential, it is insufficient for contemporary discourse, especially when interrogated from a postcolonial or indigenous standpoint. More recent sociological scholarship sees community not merely as a fixed social unit but as a dynamic and relational process. According to Delanty (2018), community is best understood as a "symbolic construction" that reflects shared meanings, cultural practices, and identity formations within specific historical contexts. This approach emphasizes how communities are continuously (re)constructed through discourse and interaction, challenging essentialist and Eurocentric definitions.

Philosophically, community has been interpreted through both ontological and ethical lenses. Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) proposes that community is not constituted by a common essence but by a shared experience of finitude and relationality. For Nancy, community emerges in the space between individuals rather than in their substantive attributes. This view resonates with African philosophies, which prioritize relational ontology over individual

substance. Similarly, Roberto Esposito (2010) critiques the Western framing of community as a bounded and immune space, advocating instead for an "affirmative biopolitics" that welcomes openness, vulnerability, and mutual dependence.

Suffice it to state that these perspectives, though useful, must be critically engaged alongside indigenous epistemologies that foreground cosmological and ethical dimensions of community often ignored in Western traditions. Consequently, postcolonial theorists have long argued that Western conceptualizations of community often obscure or marginalize indigenous notions that prioritize interconnectedness, spirituality, and cosmological harmony. Scholars such as Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (2016) and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) challenge the universalization of Eurocentric epistemes, arguing for epistemic decolonization and the revalidation of African indigenous knowledge systems.

In many African cultures, the community is not merely a social construct but a cosmological reality that includes the living, the dead (ancestors), and the yet unborn (Mbiti, 2015; Ramose, 2019). This tripartite structure of existence underscores the African notion of interconnectedness, whereby human beings are deeply embedded in a relational web that extends beyond space and time as strongly captured in many African cosmologies, particularly that of *ubuntu*, as "*I am because we are*." This worldview as some have argued encapsulates the idea of collective identity, mutual responsibility, and communal well-being over individual autonomy (Letseka, 2016).

Furthermore, African conceptions of community are grounded in ontological holism. According to Mogobe Ramose (2019), being is not an isolated category but a relational mode of existence. This contrasts sharply with Cartesian dualism and liberal individualism, which dominate Western philosophical traditions. African cosmologies resist the separation of self from community, spirit from matter, and humanity from nature. Instead, they offer a dynamic understanding of being-in-relation, where ethical obligations flow from one's embeddedness in a network of reciprocal relationships.

Integrating sociological, philosophical, and indigenous perspectives offers a more comprehensive theorization of community that is both critical and constructive. As Agbibo (2023) notes, rethinking community through African lenses provides crucial ethical resources for addressing global crises such as climate change, inequality, and social fragmentation. These indigenous frameworks challenge the hyper-individualism and extractive logics that undergird much of the modern global order, proposing instead a model of shared existence rooted in reciprocity, solidarity, and ecological balance.

The theoretical conceptualization of community must move beyond Eurocentric paradigms to embrace pluriversal epistemologies. African cosmogonies, with

their emphasis on relationality, sacred interconnectedness, and communal flourishing, provide not only alternative visions of human sociality but also vital tools for reimagining global ethics in the 21st century world.

The Concept of Community in African Cosmogony

The African understanding of community is deeply rooted in cosmogonic narratives that articulate the origin, structure, and ethical orientation of the universe. Far beyond the confines of sociological configurations, community in African thought is a metaphysical and ontological reality—an interconnected web of beings encompassing the living, the dead, nature, and the divine. This comprehensive worldview offers a profound counterpoint to modern Western notions of atomized individualism and anthropocentric existence.

African ontology does not conceive of the self as an isolated substance, but as a node within a larger communal and cosmic order. For example, Ramose (2019) explains that *ubuntu* philosophy articulates this relational mode of being through the maxim, "*Motho ke motho ka batho*" (*a person is a person through other persons*). Similarly, Abua's cosmology expresses the concept of community as *po-oye po-oye kuenigheghan ema awaye* meaning *it is the presence of people that makes the existence of other people possible*. This formulation is not merely ethical but ontological and expresses the fundamental interdependence of all existence. The person comes into being, not as a self-contained unit, but through participation in the life of the community, the cosmos, and the ancestors.

In many African cosmogonies—whether among the Yoruba, Akan, Igbo, or Bantu peoples—the creation of the world is depicted not as a mechanical or impersonal act but as the unfolding of a sacred and ordered relational system. Human beings, nature, deities, and ancestors co-exist within a morally charged universe, where every being has its place, role, and responsibility (Kanu, 2021). Disruption of this relational equilibrium results in cosmic disharmony, requiring ritual and communal responses to restore balance.

One of the most distinctive features of African communal thought is its tripartite conception of community—comprising the living, the ancestors (living-dead), and the yet-to-be-born. This vision, articulated by Mbiti (2015) and further developed in recent scholarship, reflects a cyclical and regenerative understanding of life and community.

Ancestors are not merely past figures but active participants in the moral and spiritual life of the community. They mediate between the divine and the human, uphold communal values, and ensure continuity of tradition and order (Chimuka, 2020). The unborn are also included in this communal matrix, symbolizing the future of the lineage and the intergenerational responsibility

inherent in African ethics. The moral imperative to preserve nature, sustain harmony, and uphold justice is thus grounded in the communal obligations to both past and future generations.

African cosmogony is holistic and ecological. Nature is not a passive backdrop but an animate and sacred entity. Mountains, rivers, trees, and animals are often regarded as embodiments or dwellings of spiritual beings. This cosmological orientation fosters a deep ethic of environmental stewardship. As Orogun (2022) argues, the African ecological worldview challenges exploitative and extractive paradigms, proposing instead a reverential and reciprocal relationship with the natural world.

Traditional African religions reinforce this worldview by embedding cosmological myths in rituals, festivals, and taboos that regulate human interaction with the environment. The community, in this sense, includes non-human entities whose well-being is essential for communal flourishing. Ecological justice, therefore, becomes a spiritual and communal mandate rather than merely a political or scientific concern.

African communalism is often misunderstood as collectivism or a suppression of individuality. However, as Letseka (2016) and Mangena (2020) clarify, African communalism affirms individuality within a framework of mutual responsibility. It is a dynamic interplay between personal agency and communal obligation. Rights and privileges are balanced by duties to others and to the cosmic order.

The moral authority of the community stems not from coercive power but from its alignment with the sacred order of the universe. Disruption of this moral harmony—whether through selfishness, greed, or environmental degradation—is not just a social failure but a cosmological breach. Traditional African conflict resolution mechanisms, such as truth-telling, reparative justice, and reconciliation ceremonies, often draw upon these cosmological values to restore balance.

In rethinking global ethics and world order, the African concept of community offers a compelling alternative. It challenges liberal models of contractualism, sovereignty, and anthropocentrism by foregrounding interdependence, spirituality, and ecological embeddedness. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) asserts, African cosmogonic thought holds valuable resources for constructing a more inclusive, sustainable, and peaceful global order.

Recent scholarly efforts have termed this vision "cosmopolitical ethics"—an approach that sees politics as an extension of sacred cosmology, where all beings are participants in shaping a just and harmonious world (Nyamnjoh, 2017). This radically pluralistic view defies the rigid borders of nation-states and market logics, inviting a reimagination of community on global scales.

Global World Order in the 21st Century

The 21st-century global world order represents a complex and contested arena of political, economic, and ethical interrelations shaped by both historical legacies and emerging transformations. It encompasses the norms, institutions, and power dynamics that govern international relations and influence global decision-making processes. At the heart of this world order lies a dialectic between competing paradigms—liberal democratic capitalism on one hand and rising calls for decolonial, ecological, and pluralistic alternatives on the other.

The political dimension of the global world order is predominantly defined by the post-World War II institutional architecture, anchored by organizations such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO). While these institutions were ostensibly designed to promote peace, cooperation, and economic development, their practices have often reflected and reinforced Western hegemonic interests. As Acharya (2018) notes, the liberal international order has increasingly come under scrutiny for privileging the political and economic dominance of the Global North, particularly through mechanisms of conditional aid, interventionist diplomacy, and trade asymmetries.

Economically, neoliberal globalization remains the dominant framework, characterized by deregulation, privatization, and free market orthodoxy. Though it has facilitated transnational flows of capital and technology, it has also exacerbated global inequality, undermined local economies, and marginalized indigenous knowledge systems. Scholars such as Stiglitz (2019) and Ndongo (2022) argue that these economic structures continue colonial patterns of extraction and dependency, perpetuating what some has termed “epistemic and economic imperialism.” The ethical crisis of the 21st-century global order is perhaps its most acute challenge. Despite normative frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the lived reality remains one of deepening inequality, ecological degradation, and widespread displacement. Climate change disproportionately affects developing nations, despite being driven by industrialized countries. Migration crises, rooted in conflict, poverty, and climate-induced displacement, have exposed the fragility of global solidarity and the moral failures of nation-state borders. In addition, global responses to pandemics like COVID-19 have highlighted the moral deficits of the prevailing order. Vaccine nationalism, hoarding, and uneven distribution patterns have revealed a world system more aligned with profit and power than with shared humanity (Benton, 2021). These crises underscore the urgent need for alternative ethical frameworks that emphasize care,

reciprocity, and communal responsibility—values central to African communitarian thought.

Western hegemonic structures are underpinned by the legacy of Enlightenment rationalism, liberal individualism, and the nation-state model. These paradigms have advanced a universalizing logic that often disregards indigenous and communal ways of knowing and being. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020), the current world order is still largely “colonial in its logic and capitalist in its operation,” marginalizing African ontologies and rendering them peripheral to global epistemic legitimacy.

Moreover, the modern state system—with its emphasis on sovereignty, competition, and militarized borders—has failed to adequately address transnational problems such as environmental collapse, pandemics, and human trafficking. As Santos (2018) argues, the monoculture of Western political rationality must give way to a “pluriverse” of global knowledges and practices, allowing room for epistemologies rooted in relationality, interdependence, and ecological attunement.

Against this backdrop, the African concept of community offers a radical reorientation of global ethics and governance. The philosophy of *I am because We are* is both an ethical and political paradigm, and emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings and the necessity of solidarity, dialogue, and reconciliation (Mokgoro, 2016). These values are not only cultural expressions but also blueprints for global coexistence.

For instance, climate change—often framed through technocratic and capitalist solutions—can benefit from African ecological ethics that stress harmony with nature, sacred stewardship, and the interconnectedness of human and non-human life. Migration and displacement, currently treated as crises of security and demography, might be reframed through African concepts of hospitality and kinship that extend communal care beyond blood ties or national citizenship.

Post-genocide reconciliation in Rwanda, based on *gacaca* courts and Ubuntu ethics, exemplifies how African communitarian values can foster peace and restorative justice in deeply fractured societies (Murithi, 2020). These models challenge punitive and adversarial justice systems that dominate international law and diplomacy.

The future of global cooperation depends not on the homogenization of cultures but on the recognition of epistemic diversity. The African cosmogonic vision of community—where the self exists only in relation to others and nature—is a timely and transformative contribution to global discourse. It invites a shift from domination to dialogue, from exploitation to stewardship, and from isolation to interdependence.

As the global order confronts existential threats—rising authoritarianism, ecological collapse, and technological dislocation—African communal philosophies offer both critique and construction. They call for a moral and

political recalibration that foregrounds the sacredness of life, the necessity of justice, and the primacy of communal flourishing over individual accumulation.

Implications of the African Concept of Community for Global World Order

The African concept of community, as articulated through indigenous cosmologies, offers not merely a cultural curiosity but a vital philosophical and ethical framework for addressing the crises of the 21st-century global order. As the international system confronts growing polarization, ecological collapse, and ethical exhaustion, African communalism—grounded in relationality, reciprocity, and ecological harmony—emerges as a powerful counter-model capable of inspiring more sustainable and peaceful global futures.

At the heart of African communalism is the principle of *interdependence*—a recognition that human flourishing is possible only through mutual care and cooperation. This is exemplified in the widely cited philosophy of *ubuntu*, often rendered as “*I am because we are.*” Rather than seeing relationships as optional or contractual, African communal thought treats them as ontological necessities (Letseka, 2016). Applied to global politics, this ethic challenges the prevailing *realpolitik* of national self-interest and suggests a more solidaristic model of international cooperation.

The African Union’s adoption of *ubuntu* principles in peace and reconciliation efforts (e.g., the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights) reflects a growing recognition of indigenous values in transnational governance (Murithi, 2020). Moreover, African communitarianism encourages a shift from punitive diplomacy to *dialogical engagement*, where negotiation and restorative justice take precedence over sanctions and military interventions.

Environmental degradation is arguably the most urgent challenge facing the global order today. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution have intensified due to unsustainable consumption patterns rooted in extractivist and individualist economic models. African cosmologies, which view nature as a living, spiritual entity rather than a resource to be dominated, offer an alternative foundation for environmental ethics.

Traditional African ecological practices—such as sacred groves, communal land tenure, and taboos against over-harvesting—illustrate a profound *eco-relational ontology* (Kanu, 2021). These customs are underpinned by the belief that humans are stewards rather than owners of nature, accountable not only to present communities but also to ancestors and unborn generations. Global frameworks such as the UN’s *Harmony with Nature* initiative resonate with this worldview, suggesting that African environmental thought can inform broader sustainability agendas.

One case in point is the Ogiek community in Kenya, whose indigenous forest stewardship was recently recognized by

the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights in a landmark 2017 ruling. The decision affirmed the community’s right to preserve its ecological and spiritual heritage, setting a precedent for integrating indigenous environmental ethics into international law (Omondi, 2020).

African communal thought also has deep implications for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Rather than adversarial justice systems that seek punishment and retribution, African approaches emphasize restorative justice, community healing, and reintegration of offenders. The *gacaca* courts in post-genocide Rwanda stand as one of the most cited examples. Based on traditional conflict resolution practices and undergirded by *ubuntu* philosophy, *gacaca* emphasized truth-telling, forgiveness, and community rebuilding over retributive justice (Murithi, 2020).

While not without criticism—particularly regarding issues of due process—the *gacaca* system enabled the processing of nearly two million genocide-related cases, significantly reducing the burden on formal courts and fostering a measure of reconciliation in a deeply fractured society. This model has inspired interest from global peacebuilding institutions as a viable approach in contexts where formal legal systems are overwhelmed or distrusted.

Similarly, South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, explicitly invoked *ubuntu* as a moral framework for national healing after apartheid. These examples illustrate how African communal ethics can offer scalable models for transitional justice and post-conflict reconciliation, challenging the dominance of Western punitive paradigms.

Beyond specific applications, the African concept of community invites a broader reimagining of globalization as a relational and ethical process rather than a mere economic or technological phenomenon. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) argues, globalization must be decolonized—not only by revising its power dynamics but by expanding the range of epistemologies and value systems that inform its practices.

African communalism contributes to this effort by insisting on epistemic humility and pluriversality—the recognition that no single worldview holds a monopoly on truth or progress. In the context of rising nationalism, xenophobia, and epistemic enclosure, this inclusive ethos becomes a vital resource for building global systems rooted in mutual respect and dialogical plurality.

Moreover, African community-based health practices during the Ebola and COVID-19 crises have shown how grassroots solidarity and trust networks can supplement or even outperform centralized, technocratic models of crisis response (Benton, 2021). These cases affirm that

indigenous communal systems are not relics of the past but living frameworks capable of responding to contemporary global challenges.

Synthesizing African cosmogonic visions with global imperatives reveals the transformative potential of communal ethics for global governance, sustainability, and peace. It invites international policymakers, scholars, and institutions to move beyond instrumental rationality and embrace relational rationality—an ethic of care, reciprocity, and holistic well-being.

The African concept of community—encompassing ancestors, nature, the living, and the unborn—offers not only a critique of the current global order but also a set of constructive principles for reimagining it. By foregrounding relationality over rivalry, harmony over hierarchy, and sustainability over supremacy, African communalism presents a compelling paradigm for building a more just, peaceful, and ecologically attuned world.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the African concept of community through the lens of cosmogony, presenting it as a profound ontological and ethical framework capable of addressing the pressing challenges of the 21st-century global order. Rooted in indigenous philosophies, African communalism affirms a vision of existence characterized by relationality, interdependence, and spiritual harmony—values that stand in stark contrast to the individualism, anthropocentrism, and instrumental rationality dominant in Western traditions.

Drawing from a relational ontology that integrates the living, the ancestors, the unborn, and the natural world, African cosmogony offers a holistic model for rethinking global ethics, governance, and sustainability. As global crises such as ecological degradation, inequality, forced migration, and epistemic injustice intensify, the communal ethics of *ubuntu*, eco-relationality, and restorative justice provide both a critique of existing hegemonies and a blueprint for alternative futures.

Empirical examples such as Rwanda's *gacaca* courts, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Ogiek community's environmental justice struggles in Kenya further demonstrate the applicability of African communal values in resolving complex global challenges. These case studies reveal that African worldviews are not archaic remnants of the past but living, dynamic philosophies that continue to shape viable pathways for peace, justice, and ecological balance.

Therefore, integrating African cosmogony into global ethical discourse is not merely an act of inclusion—it is an urgent imperative for building a pluriversal world order grounded in dignity, solidarity, and sustainability. To achieve this, there must be a decisive shift in international policy, educational systems, and epistemological frameworks. This entails a deliberate move away from

Eurocentric universalism toward an Afrocentric lens that validates indigenous knowledge systems, reshapes curricula, and reimagines diplomacy and governance through the wisdom of communal lifeways.

In rethinking the architecture of global ethics, the African concept of community compels us to ask not just how we live, but how we live together—with each other, with the earth, and with the generations that came before and will come after. It is in this sacred interrelationship that the future of a just and flourishing world may be found.

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