



EUROCENTRIC INDIVIDUALISM AND THE EROSION OF AFRICAN EXTENDED FAMILY BONDS: A THEOLOGICAL AND EXEGETICAL CRITIQUE

By

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Abstract

The African extended family once represented the nucleus of communal identity, moral formation, and social support. Kinship ties created networks of belonging in which every individual was accountable to the other. However, the infiltration of Eurocentric individualism, reinforced by missionary Christianity and global modernity, has significantly eroded these bonds. In contemporary African societies, especially among urban populations, the nuclear family has replaced the extended household, while Christian theology has often adopted Western categories that prioritize personal salvation and private spirituality over communal responsibility. This paper undertakes a theological and exegetical critique of this phenomenon. Through a close reading of selected biblical texts—Genesis 4:9 (“Am I my brother’s keeper?”), Acts 2:42–47, and Galatians 6:2—this study argues that Scripture itself upholds communal ethics that resonate deeply with traditional African kinship values. By juxtaposing Eurocentric theological individualism with the biblical notion of koinonia (fellowship) and African communitarian anthropology, the paper demonstrates that authentic Christian life is inherently relational. The study calls for a contextual theological renewal that reclaims the African sense of family, hospitality, and collective responsibility as essential dimensions of the Christian faith. It concludes that the recovery of extended family consciousness within African Christianity is not a regression to the past, but a rediscovery of biblical relationality and ecclesial identity rooted in the triune God.

Keywords: *African Communalism, Eurocentric Individualism, Extended Family Bonds, Contextual Theology, Nigerian Christianity*

1. Introduction

The African social landscape has historically been defined by an enduring sense of family and community. Within this communal framework, the extended family system functioned as the foundation of identity, moral instruction, economic cooperation, and social security. In many traditional societies, an individual was regarded not as an autonomous being but as a member of a wider kinship network that extended beyond the nuclear household. Proverbs such as the Yoruba saying “*Ẹniyan ni aṣọ mi*” (people are my covering) or the Zulu concept of *ubuntu*—“I am because we are”—capture this collective worldview in which mutual care and shared destiny were indispensable.

However, in the last few decades, this communal fabric has steadily disintegrated. The forces of modernization, urban migration, consumerism, and technological globalization have redefined the African family structure. Many children now grow up detached from their extended relatives; uncles, aunts, and cousins once integral to socialization have become distant acquaintances or complete strangers. Family gatherings, once symbols of cohesion and belonging, are increasingly replaced by virtual interactions or individual pursuits. The church, which should serve as a moral custodian of communal values, has not been immune to this trend. Indeed, much of contemporary African Christianity appears to have internalized the Western individualistic ethos embedded in missionary theology, emphasizing “personal salvation,” “my blessing,” and “private faith” often at the expense of communal responsibility and relational discipleship.



This shift poses serious theological and ethical questions. Has the African church inadvertently replaced the biblical and cultural vision of community with a privatized, Eurocentric spirituality? To what extent has Western theology, shaped by Enlightenment notions of individuality and self-determination, distorted African Christian consciousness? And more importantly, what biblical and theological resources can guide a renewal of the extended family ethos that once characterized African life?

The purpose of this paper is to address these questions through a theological and exegetical critique of Eurocentric individualism and its impact on African extended family bonds. The study argues that a recovery of communal theology, rooted in both Scripture and African cultural anthropology, is essential for a more authentic Christian witness on the continent. Using selected biblical texts as hermeneutical anchors such as Genesis 4:9, Acts 2:42–47, and Galatians 6:2, the paper demonstrates that the biblical narrative consistently affirms collective responsibility and mutual care. Far from endorsing isolated spirituality, the Bible envisions God's people as a covenantal community bound together in love and service.

Methodologically, the study adopts a contextual theological approach, integrating exegetical analysis with African communal philosophy. The exegetical component draws on linguistic and socio-historical readings of the chosen texts, while the theological reflection engages African scholars such as John Mbiti, Benezet Bujo, and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, who have emphasized relational ontology as central to African theology. This combined method allows for a dynamic dialogue between the biblical world and African experience, thereby unmasking the cultural biases that have shaped African Christian thought through colonial and postcolonial encounters.

By undertaking this analysis, the paper seeks not to romanticize precolonial African life, but to construct a constructive theological framework that restores the biblical principle of communal living within the realities of modern Africa. Ultimately, it calls for the reformation of church teaching, pastoral care, and Christian social ethics to reflect the household model of the early church; a model that harmonizes with Africa's traditional sense of extended family. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing debates on contextual theology, communal ethics, and postcolonial critique of Western Christianity.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This section lays the intellectual and theological foundation for the argument of this paper. It defines the key concepts, traces the philosophical roots of Eurocentric individualism, contrasts them with African communal anthropology, and outlines the theoretical lens through which exegetical and theological reflections will be conducted.

2.1 Understanding Eurocentric Individualism

The term Eurocentric individualism denotes a worldview that emerged from the European Enlightenment, emphasizing personal autonomy, rational self-determination, and the moral independence of the individual. Thinkers such as René Descartes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant advanced the notion that human identity and morality are grounded primarily in individual reason and freedom. While this paradigm contributed to human rights and personal liberty, it also fostered an anthropological shift from communal belonging to individual self-sufficiency.

In theology, this mindset influenced Western Christianity, producing what many scholars describe as a privatized faith; one that prioritizes personal salvation, inward spirituality, and individual moral accountability, often detached from social or communal structures. Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) describes this as the “atomization of moral life,” where human beings are viewed as self-contained moral agents rather than members of an interdependent community. Similarly, Stanley Hauerwas (1981) critiques modern Western theology for replacing the biblical vision of the *ekklesia*—a community of shared life, with the moralism of autonomous individuals seeking private virtue.



Eurocentric individualism was not only philosophical but also missionary and ecclesial in expression. When Western missionaries arrived in Africa, they brought along not only the gospel but also the sociocultural values of Victorian domestic life. The Christian family was modelled after the European nuclear household: husband, wife, and children. The extended family system; an institution deeply embedded in African cosmology, was often viewed as “pagan” or “primitive.” As Kwame Bediako (1995) and Lamin Sanneh (2009) have shown, the Western missionary agenda unconsciously universalized its cultural forms as the normative Christian experience, thereby marginalizing indigenous communal structures. The result has been the internalization of an individualistic Christian consciousness that often undermines African kinship values and erodes the sense of interdependence that once defined family relations.

Thus, Eurocentric individualism, when uncritically absorbed into African Christianity, disrupts the holistic vision of life and family. It fragments the social and spiritual cohesion that once bound generations together and weakens the moral responsibility that extended family members owe one another.

2.2 African Communal Anthropology

By contrast, African communal anthropology views the human person as essentially relational. In the words of John Mbiti (1969:108), “*I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.*” Personhood is not an inherent individual possession but a dynamic quality achieved through participation in the life of the community. Every individual belongs to a web of relationships involving the living, the dead (ancestors), and the yet unborn. The family, therefore, is not limited to parents and children but includes uncles, aunts, cousins, elders, and even distant relatives who share social and spiritual obligations.

African theologians such as Laurenti Magesa (1997) and Benezet Bujo (1998) describe this worldview as vital participation, which is the idea that life gains meaning through communion and shared existence. This ontology of interconnectedness manifests in collective child-rearing, communal resource-sharing, and social responsibility. Within such a system, neglecting family members or ignoring kinship duties is seen not merely as social failure but as moral and spiritual brokenness.

However, modernization, urban migration, and the pressures of neoliberal capitalism have diluted these communal values. Families increasingly adopt nuclear structures, with individual progress replacing communal welfare as the dominant aspiration. The resulting fragmentation of extended family ties leaves the elderly neglected, children socially isolated, and kinship solidarity diminished. From a theological perspective, this trend calls for a re-contextualization of Christian teaching that recovers the biblical affirmation of community as central to faith and life.

2.3 Theoretical Lens: Contextual Theology and Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics

This paper employs contextual theology and intercultural biblical hermeneutics as its theoretical frameworks. Contextual theology insists that theology must arise from within specific cultural and historical experiences, not be imported wholesale from foreign traditions (Bevans, 2002). It recognizes that divine revelation engages human culture and that local worldviews shape the interpretation of Scripture. For African Christianity, this means reading the Bible through the lens of African communal life, hospitality, and kinship.

Intercultural biblical hermeneutics, as developed by scholars such as Hans de Wit and Gerald West and started gaining prominence in the late 1990s and early 2000s, promotes dialogue between the biblical text, Western interpretation, and the lived experiences of non-Western readers. It does not reject Western theology outright but subjects it to critique and transformation through the insights of local contexts. In this study, the intercultural approach allows for a conversation between biblical communal ethics and African kinship ontology, revealing convergences that challenge the dominance of Eurocentric individualism.

Theologically, this framework is grounded in a relational Trinitarian model; the understanding that God’s own being is communal (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and that humanity, created in God’s



image, is called to mirror this relational existence. The early church's emphasis on *koinonia* (Acts 2:42–47) reflects this divine pattern of mutual sharing and interdependence. Therefore, the erosion of extended family bonds in Africa is not merely a sociological problem but a theological contradiction of the divine nature itself.

In sum, this framework establishes a dialectic between two competing anthropologies: the Eurocentric individualist, which defines existence in terms of autonomy and self-interest, and the African communal, which defines existence in terms of relationship and mutuality. The task of theology in Africa today is to reconcile Christian faith with the indigenous sense of community without compromising biblical integrity. By reading Scripture through African eyes, the church can rediscover the theological roots of extended family life and reimagine itself as a household of faith that embodies the divine communion it proclaims.

3. The African Extended Family System: A Cultural-Theological Overview

3.1 The Nature of the African Extended Family

The extended family is one of the most defining features of African social organization. It functions not merely as a biological unit but as a communal structure embodying the African worldview of relationality and interdependence (Mbiti, 1969). In most African societies, kinship extends beyond the nuclear family to include grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and even distant relatives who share social and moral responsibilities. According to Gyekye (1997), the African understanding of personhood is inherently relational—"I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." This communitarian ethos forms the foundation of what many scholars describe as African humanism or Ubuntu (Shutte, 2001).

Within this framework, the family serves as the primary institution for socialization, economic cooperation, and moral education. Children are raised collectively by the community, and kinship obligations define moral virtue and identity. As Nussbaum (2003) notes, Ubuntu-based family structures emphasize compassion, mutual care, and reciprocity as essential to human existence. Consequently, the extended family operates as both a social safety net and a moral community which is a system of belonging that reflects the African conviction that life is lived *with* and *through* others (Tangwa, 1996).

3.2 Communalism as a Theological Motif

African communalism is not only a cultural reality but also bears profound theological implications. Mbiti (1970) argues that African religion and culture perceive humanity as intrinsically bound to community and to God through a web of spiritual and social relationships. This worldview mirrors the biblical notion of covenant community, where identity and morality are grounded in collective responsibility (Kärkkäinen, 2002). The African extended family, therefore, provides a natural context for understanding the corporate dimensions of biblical theology, especially the concepts of covenant, body of Christ, and *koinonia*.

In African Traditional Religion (ATR), the family is not limited to the living but includes ancestors as vital members of the community (Idowu, 1973). This trans-generational continuity resonates with the biblical understanding of the communion of saints (Heb. 12:1). Theologically, it portrays life as a sacred continuum where the living, the dead, and the unborn share a divine destiny. As Setiloane (1986) observes, African ontology is deeply participatory such that every human being is linked to others in visible and invisible dimensions of existence. This worldview fosters a theology of relationality that can enrich Christian reflection on the church as a family of faith.

4. The Vanishing Bonds of Family in Modern Nigeria: Causes and Theological Concerns

The traditional African extended family system once functioned as the nucleus of social cohesion, moral formation, and mutual support. In Nigeria, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, family relationships historically extended beyond the nuclear structure, encompassing a wide network of kinship relations defined by shared ancestry, responsibilities, and solidarity (Akinyemi,



2017). However, the forces of modernity including urbanization, globalization, and Western individualism have profoundly eroded these bonds, creating what scholars now describe as a crisis of communal identity (Iruonagbe, 2010). The decline of family bonding has far-reaching social, moral, and theological implications, as it affects not only kinship structures but also the moral imagination of Christian communities in Nigeria.

4.1 Socioeconomic and Cultural Drivers of the Decline

One of the most significant factors contributing to the weakening of extended family bonds in Nigeria is urbanization. The postcolonial migration from rural to urban centers in search of economic opportunities has led to the dispersal of family members, thereby reducing interpersonal contact and traditional family rituals (Adepoju, 2019). In urban contexts, the nuclear family model, often influenced by Western lifestyles, becomes dominant due to spatial and economic constraints. Adegoke (2018) observes that city life promotes self-sufficiency and privacy, undermining traditional communal values of interdependence and mutual obligation.

Globalization has further intensified this shift by promoting individual achievement, material success, and consumerist culture. Ehusani (1991) argues that the penetration of Western cultural ideals has reshaped African notions of personhood, replacing the communal “we” with the individualistic “I.” This transformation affects the younger generation in particular, many of whom now prioritize personal aspirations over family solidarity. In some cases, digital media and global connectivity have replaced physical interactions, resulting in emotional disconnection within kin networks (Adediran & Akinola, 2022).

Economic hardship also plays a major role. The pressures of unemployment, inflation, and social inequality have made it increasingly difficult for individuals to sustain traditional family responsibilities. In the past, communal sharing provided a safety net for widows, orphans, and the unemployed. Today, however, financial stress has led to selective support systems, where kinship obligations are often neglected (Okon, 2012). The economic strain has shifted family values from collective survival to individual survival, further fragmenting relational ties.

4.2 Western Christianity and the Rise of Individualistic Theology

The Christian church in Nigeria, while thriving numerically, has not been immune to the cultural shift toward individualism. The Euro-American missionary legacy emphasized personal piety and nuclear family ideals, often at the expense of African communal values (Oduro et al., 2008). This theological orientation reinforced a privatized spirituality that prioritized personal salvation and nuclear domesticity, sidelining the extended family as a locus of moral and spiritual life (Kalu, 2008).

Modern Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on prosperity, individual destiny, and self-realization, has inadvertently deepened this orientation. Ukah (2020) notes that prosperity theology in Nigerian Pentecostalism often redefines success in individual terms, measuring divine blessing by personal achievement rather than communal wellbeing. The result is a Christianity that celebrates independence but neglects interdependence—a contradiction to both African tradition and biblical teaching.

This individualistic turn within Christianity undermines the theological foundations of *koinonia*, the New Testament vision of shared life in Christ (Acts 2:42–47). By focusing on the individual believer’s relationship with God, churches often fail to nurture communal belonging that reflects the Trinitarian nature of divine fellowship. Orobator (2008) argues that this Eurocentric theology of individualism contradicts African religiosity, which sees salvation, morality, and identity as inherently communal realities. Thus, Nigerian Christianity must be re-theologized to recover its communal and relational essence.



4.3 Technological Modernity and the Loss of Interpersonal Communication

In the contemporary digital age, technology simultaneously connects and isolates. The proliferation of smartphones, social media, and online communities has redefined the meaning of relationship and proximity. While digital communication enhances connectivity, it also reduces the quality of embodied interactions essential to African communal life (Onwubiko, 2021). Children increasingly grow up without physical contact or shared experiences with cousins, uncles, and extended kin—relationships that were once central to identity formation.

Scholars describe this as the rise of the “**virtual family**,” where relational bonds exist primarily through mediated platforms rather than tangible communal presence (Edewor, 2018). Theologically, this development raises concerns about the loss of *incarnational relationships*—the tangible embodiment of love and fellowship modelled in the person of Christ (John 1:14). Christian theology affirms that true fellowship is not abstract but lived through bodily presence and shared experience (Volf, 1998). Hence, digital isolation, though often unintentional, poses a threat to the lived expression of Christian community and African kinship.

4.4 Theological Implications: From Relational Ontology to Ecclesial Crisis

The vanishing bonds of the extended family carry deep theological implications. First, they challenge the African ontology of relational personhood, which holds that being human is defined through belonging and participation (Menkiti, 2004). As this worldview erodes, there is a growing existential crisis—individuals experience alienation, loneliness, and moral dislocation. Second, the decline in family solidarity has translated into ecclesial fragmentation, where churches mirror social isolation rather than offer a countercultural model of fellowship. The church, once viewed as an *extended family of God* (Eph. 2:19), is increasingly perceived as an institution rather than a household of faith. This is due to the fact that organisational structures, bureaucracy, and administrative concerns now overshadow genuine spiritual fellowship, communal care, and relational discipleship among believers.

Furthermore, the neglect of extended kinship weakens the moral fabric of society. The extended family traditionally functioned as a moral regulator, enforcing discipline, respect for elders, and care for the vulnerable. Its decline has created a vacuum now filled by impersonal state institutions or unregulated social influences (Obasi, 2015). From a theological standpoint, this represents a loss of *embodied moral theology*, where ethics was once lived and taught through relational mentorship within the family (Iroegbu, 2005).

In summary, the disintegration of the extended family in Nigeria is not only a sociological problem but a theological crisis that calls for re-engagement with biblical and African communal visions of humanity. Reconstructing the theology of family from an African perspective may thus offer a prophetic corrective to the current cultural drift toward atomization.

5. Biblical and Exegetical Foundations for Communal Life

5.1 Genesis 4:9: “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?”: The Ethics of Responsibility and Relationality

The earliest ethical crisis in the biblical narrative emerges in Genesis 4:9, when Cain, having murdered his brother, poses a defiant question to God: “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” The Hebrew word שָׁמַר (*shamar*), meaning “to keep, watch, or guard,” implies active responsibility rather than passive concern (Brueggemann, 1982). Cain’s denial of relational duty represents humanity’s first act of social alienation, signifying a rupture in both divine-human and human-human relationships (Westermann, 1984).

Exegetically, the passage portrays sin not merely as moral failure but as the disintegration of relational solidarity. God’s confrontation of Cain underscores that moral life is grounded in community; individual autonomy detached from moral responsibility leads to violence and estrangement. As von Rad (1972) observes, Genesis 4 establishes a paradigm where brotherhood defines human identity—its negation signals rebellion against the Creator’s social order.



From an African theological perspective, the question “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” resonates deeply with the erosion of communal ethics in modern society. Traditional African ontology affirms that a person’s wellbeing is inseparable from the wellbeing of the community (Mbiti, 1969; Menkiti, 2004). Hence, the biblical mandate to be one’s brother’s keeper aligns with the African ideal of relational personhood, which views care, empathy, and solidarity as constitutive of humanity. The text challenges contemporary Nigerian Christians to resist imported models of individualism and reclaim the biblical ethic of custodial responsibility; the moral obligation to safeguard the life and welfare of others as a reflection of divine fellowship.

5.2 Acts 2:42–47: The *Koinonia* of the Early Church as Paradigm of Communal Life

The depiction of the early Christian community in Acts 2:42–47 offers the New Testament’s clearest expression of communal discipleship. Luke’s account highlights four defining practices: devotion to apostolic teaching, fellowship (*koinonia*), breaking of bread, and prayers. The statement that “all who believed were together and had all things in common” (v. 44) reflects an intentional socio-spiritual reordering of life around shared belonging (Marshall, 1980).

Linguistically, the Greek term **κοινωνία** (*koinonia*) encompasses notions of participation, partnership, and sharing (Fitzmyer, 1998). The imperfect tense verbs used in verses 44–45 (e.g., ἦσαν καὶ εἶχον πάντα κοινά — “they were having all things in common”) indicate continuous communal practice rather than isolated acts. Luke’s portrayal thus emphasizes ongoing fellowship and mutual support as essential marks of Christian identity.

This early Christian ethos mirrors the African extended family system, where kinship ties ensure shared resources and mutual protection (Gyekye, 1997). Both communities understood life as a collective enterprise sustained by relational interdependence. Yet, modern Nigerian Christianity, often shaped by Western ecclesial models, has drifted toward institutional and individualistic expressions of faith. Orobator (2008) argues that African churches must recover *koinonia* as the central ecclesial identity—a living experience of divine and human communion that mirrors both Trinitarian fellowship and African communal life. Theologically, Acts 2 invites the African church to embody the church not as a bureaucratic structure but as a spiritual household (*oikos tou Theou*) where generosity, hospitality, and mutual care reflect God’s inclusive love. In this sense, *koinonia* is not optional but constitutive of the church’s being (Volf, 1998).

5.3 Galatians 6:2 — “Bear One Another’s Burdens”: A Pauline Theology of Mutual Care

Paul’s exhortation in Galatians 6:2—“*Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ*” encapsulates the Pauline vision of mutuality and interdependence. The Greek verb **βαστάζετε** (*bastazete*), meaning “to carry or endure,” conveys the image of sharing another’s heavy load (Lightfoot, 1892). The phrase “*law of Christ*” points back to the commandment of love (John 13:34–35), indicating that Christian ethics is essentially communal and participatory (Bruce, 1982). Exegetically, Paul presents burden-bearing as the concrete expression of grace within the believing community. By emphasizing mutual responsibility, he subverts Greco-Roman ideals of self-sufficiency and honour that defined virtue in his time (Malina & Neyrey, 1996). For African theology, this aligns with the communitarian principle that “*a person is a person through other persons*.” The call to bear one another’s burdens resonates with the African ethic of Ubuntu, which stresses compassion, relational obligation, and shared destiny (Shutte, 2001).

In contemporary Nigerian Christianity, this text challenges the prevalence of self-centred spirituality and prosperity-oriented theology. The Pauline vision redefines Christian maturity as the capacity to share in others’ sufferings and participate in communal care. Such mutual responsibility transforms the church into a redemptive family, restoring the essence of both African kinship and New Testament fellowship.



5.4 Synthesis: Toward a Theology of Relational Restoration

Across these texts, Scripture affirms a coherent theology of relational restoration; a divine call to recover humanity's communal vocation. Genesis exposes the sin of isolation; Acts embodies redeemed fellowship; and Galatians teaches burden-bearing as love's fulfilment. Together, they affirm that authentic Christian life is fundamentally communal and covenantal (Kärkkäinen, 2002). For African theology, this biblical vision validates the communitarian ontology embedded in traditional culture. The church in Nigeria must thus move beyond Western individualism to embody a relational ecclesiology that integrates kinship, hospitality, and shared responsibility. The restoration of family bonds is not merely cultural nostalgia, it is a theological imperative grounded in the very nature of God, who exists as a triune communion of love.

Conclusion

The vanishing bonds of extended family relationships in contemporary Nigeria reflect a deeper theological and cultural crisis. This study has shown that the infiltration of Eurocentric individualism; both through colonial modernity and Westernized Christian theology, has profoundly altered African social consciousness. The African extended family, once the nucleus of moral formation, communal support, and identity, is gradually being replaced by an individualistic ethos that prizes autonomy over solidarity. Unfortunately, the church, rather than countering this cultural shift, has often reinforced it through teachings that overemphasize personal salvation, private prosperity, and self-realization.

From an exegetical and theological standpoint, however, the Christian faith is inherently communal. The New Testament's vision of *koinonia* (Acts 2:42–47) and Pauline injunctions such as “bear one another's burdens” (Gal. 6:2) affirm that the body of Christ is a family bound by shared responsibility. Therefore, Christianity in Africa must be re-envisioned in ways that affirm the interdependence, hospitality, and relational ethics embedded in African communal life.

To restore vanishing family bonds, the African church must recover its social theology; one that integrates biblical *koinonia* with indigenous communal values. Practical theology should emphasize collective care, intergenerational mentorship, and shared stewardship. Furthermore, theological education and pastoral ministry should critique the dominance of Western individualism and promote contextual models of discipleship that prioritize community over isolation.

In conclusion, reversing the erosion of extended family ties in Nigeria requires both cultural and theological renewal. The church must reclaim its role as a community of belonging where faith nurtures relationships, and relationships embody faith. Only through this reintegration of theology and culture can African Christianity resist the atomizing effects of Eurocentric individualism and foster a faith that truly mirrors the communal heart of both the African worldview and the gospel of Christ.

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