

Article

The Intersections and Complexities of African Traditional Religion and Christianity: An Inquiry Through the African Philosophy of Community

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Abstract

Africans are widely recognised for their deeply rooted communal orientation. This ethos is intricately embedded in cultural practices such as burial rites, matrimonial customs, ritual observances, and broader conceptions of kinship. Within many African societies, the notion of family transcends the boundaries of the living, encompassing ancestors often conceptualised as the “living-dead” as well as extended familial networks. Despite the historical introduction and sustained influence of missionary and colonial religions, particularly Christianity, African Traditional Religion (ATR) continues to shape the beliefs and practices of many South Africans. Although Christianity remains a dominant religious tradition in South Africa, the persistence of ATR generates both points of convergence and sites of tension within the lived religious experiences of adherents. Against this backdrop, the present study critically examines the intersections and complexities between ATR and Christianity in South Africa, with particular emphasis on the African philosophy of community. Employing a qualitative research design informed by social cognitive theory and utilising a self-selection sampling strategy, data were collected through interviews with young adults (aged 25–40) affiliated with three mainline churches in Mamelodi, Pretoria, South Africa. The findings indicate that, while notable convergences exist between ATR and Christianity, significant complexities persist, particularly when interpreted through the lens of African communal philosophy.

Keywords: intersections; complexities; African traditional religion; Christianity; African philosophy of community

1. Introduction

African societies are characteristically oriented toward communalism, wherein individuality is not conceived in isolation but rather in relation to the collective. Within this framework, the communal ethos permeates all spheres of individual existence, shaping identity, values, and social responsibilities. The principle of communality is both practised and collectively sustained across the life course. For instance, the community assumes a central role during significant life events such as birth, marriage, rites of passage into adulthood, and death. In this regard, [Turaki \(1999, p. 241\)](#) underscores the importance of community by asserting that rites of passage, including birth, puberty, and death, serve as critical thresholds into communal life.

Similarly, [Gyekye \(2002, p. 102\)](#) contends that the communitarian dimensions of African socio-ethical thought are reflected in the structural organisation of African societies. He further argues ([Gyekye 2002, p. 106](#)) that the community constitutes the



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essential socio-cultural context within which personhood is realised, enabling individuals to develop their identity, express individuality, and attain socially recognised goals and expectations. Consequently, the community functions as the primary milieu in which both Christian and African Traditional religious beliefs are transmitted and internalised. Madukwe and Madukwe (2010, p. 271) reinforce this perspective by highlighting that African communalism, deeply rooted in the extended family system, permeates every aspect of life and fundamentally shapes individual worldviews. In a similar vein, Spradley and McCurdy (1975, p. 111) emphasise the inherently social nature of human existence, noting that from conception to death, individuals are embedded within a network of social relationships. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the intersections and complexities between the African philosophy of community and the Christian faith among young adults (aged 25–40) in three mainline churches in Mamelodi, Pretoria, South Africa, namely, The African Methodist Episcopal (AME), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Southern Africa (ELCSA), and Maranatha Reformed Church of Christ (MRCC). The interviews were conducted following the researcher's request for, and receipt of, permission from the clergy and church boards of the three identified churches. A self-selection sampling strategy was employed, whereby participants voluntarily offered their time after their church's permission had been granted. Informed consent was obtained after all participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the purpose of the study and the nature of the questions to be asked. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage of the research process. Initially, the researcher intended to interview ten participants across the three aforementioned churches; however, a total of thirty-two participants were ultimately interviewed. The research commenced following the granting of ethical approval by the General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) of the University of the Free State on 25 October 2021. A semi-structured interview approach was employed to collect data. An interview guide, referred to as the research guide, included a brief introductory section about the researcher, as well as a section capturing participants' demographic information, including denomination, age, ethnicity, gender, educational level, and place of residence, in addition to the interview questions. The research guide did not require the collection of names or any personally identifiable information, thereby ensuring the anonymity of participants. The document was made available in three languages predominantly spoken in Mamelodi, Pretoria, namely English, isiZulu, and Sesotho. Therefore, the article is structured as follows: first, it provides an overview of South African religious history; second, it examines African cosmology, worldview, and communalism; third, it analyses the relationship between African Traditional Religion and Christianity; fourth, it outlines the research methodology, methods and the research objectives; fifth, it presents the findings from the interviews; and finally, it offers the concluding discussion of the study.

2. South African Religious History

Fessha and Dessalegn (2021, p. 1) contend that religion constitutes a significant marker of identity for many South Africans. They attribute this to the country's colonial legacy, which they characterise as "religious apartheid," a phenomenon that continues to shape the contemporary religious landscape. In a related critique, Kgatla (2016, p. 1) argues that during the apartheid era, Christianity was appropriated and institutionalised in ways that distorted its foundational tenets, such as love, justice, and mercy, thereby serving ideological and structural functions aligned with racial segregation. Within this context, Christianity became a dominant force that not only marginalised the Black majority and their cultural expressions but also regulated access to economic resources and opportunities, privileging a minority white population. Consequently, this form of Christianity

functioned as an instrument of oppression and cultural denigration (Kgatla 2016, p. 1). Chipkin and Leatt (2017, p. 41) observe that census data provide one of the most reliable sources for understanding religious affiliation in South Africa. An analysis of the General Household Survey (GHS) data from 2001 to 2013, as presented by Schoeman (2017, pp. 3–4), indicated that Christianity remains the predominant religious affiliation in the country. Notably, in 2013, approximately 84.2% of South Africans identified as Christian. Drawing on various studies of religious affiliation, Rule and Langa (2010, p. 187) conclude that South Africans exhibit a high degree of religiosity.

Erasmus and Mans (2009, p. 4) further underscore the pervasive influence of religion, particularly Christianity, within South African society. They highlight the extensive reach of faith-based organisations, noting that churches represent one of the most influential non-governmental structures, engaging a substantial proportion of the population on a regular basis. This influence is evidenced by historical trends, with Christian affiliation increasing markedly from 45.7% in 1911 to 79.8% in 2001, thereby illustrating the enduring and expanding role of Christianity in shaping social and cultural life in South Africa. This persists despite the extensive body of scholarship highlighting the adverse consequences of colonialism, apartheid, and modernisation. Amoah and Bennett (2008, p. 363) observe that African Traditional Religion (ATR) has frequently been relegated to the status of mere cultural expression, subjected to implicit value judgements that position it as inferior to monotheistic faith traditions. Within such hierarchical frameworks, African religion is often situated at the lower end of a perceived religious spectrum. It is consequently expected to be supplanted by belief systems deemed more “advanced” or “civilised.”

Notwithstanding these historical and ideological marginalisations, religion continues to be profoundly embedded within African communities. This enduring religiosity exists alongside broader socio-economic challenges, including persistent poverty across parts of the continent. In this context, Africa’s wealth is often conceptualised not only in terms of its abundant natural resources but also in the depth of its religious commitment and spiritual life. Chipkin and Leatt (2017, p. 41) further note that the constitutional negotiations underpinning South Africa’s democratic transition explicitly recognised the significance of religion within the public sphere. These deliberations acknowledged both the diversity of religious traditions and the central role religion plays in the lives of many citizens. Consequently, the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996) enshrines the right to freedom of religion. It permits religious expression within public institutions, provided that such expression adheres to principles of equity, impartiality, and justice.

3. African Cosmology, Worldview, and Communalism

Nyang (1980, p. 28) observes that, owing to the profound diversity of the African continent, a plurality of cosmological traditions exists; nevertheless, these diverse systems of thought are undergirded by a set of shared and recurrent beliefs. Within this context, cosmology is broadly understood as the systematic study of the universe or cosmos (Ryden 2006, p. 1). Kragh (2017, p. 4) further elaborates that cosmology seeks to account for the origins, structure, and development of the universe, thereby addressing fundamental questions concerning existence.

Udefi (2012, p. 61) provides a critical framework for understanding cosmology by emphasising the intrinsic relationship between philosophy and mythology. He argues that any meaningful engagement with diverse cosmological systems necessitates an appreciation of this interconnection. Philosophy, mythology, and cosmology are rooted in a shared sense of wonder and are concerned with articulating foundational beliefs about the nature of reality and the origins of humanity. As such, they function as interpretive frameworks through which different cultural groups make sense of their lived experiences and conceptualise the

world around them (Udefi 2012, p. 61). Furthermore, Udefi (2012, p. 60) offers a concise definition of cosmology, situating it as a conceptual and analytical lens through which the structure, meaning, and origins of the universe are examined within specific cultural and philosophical contexts. The term is derived from the Greek (*Kosmos*), meaning world, and (*Logos*), meaning discourse. Then it can be defined as the study of the origin, structure, and development of the world or universe as a whole. Again, it can loosely be defined as the branch of metaphysics after ontology (the study of the meaning and nature of being), which treats the universe as an ordered system.

Viriri and Mungwini (2010, p. 29) elucidate that the term cosmology is widely employed to denote the worldviews of diverse peoples; accordingly, one may meaningfully refer to Shona cosmology, Dogon cosmology, or, in the present context, African cosmology. Udefi (2012, p. 60) further observes that cosmology and myth are intrinsically interconnected, as both seek through narrative forms to address fundamental questions concerning the origin and nature of the world, humanity, and existence in general. In a related vein, Udefi (2012, p. 62) underscores the convergence of philosophy, mythology, and cosmology, noting that these domains share underlying assumptions and conceptualisations about the universe and human life. Ayuya et al. (2015, p. 56) emphasise that African worldviews are best understood through the lens of cultural practices and social structures that constitute communal life. Within this framework, Kanu (2013, pp. 533–34) defines African cosmology as the manner in which Africans perceive, conceptualise, and interpret the universe. It represents the interpretive lens through which reality is understood, shaping value systems, attitudes, and existential orientations, and ultimately reflecting the African quest for meaning. Mbiti (1975, p. 34) similarly asserts that all reflective individuals inevitably formulate perspectives on life and the world.

Bujo (1992, p. 17) further contends that, within the African worldview, distinctions between the biological and the physical are not rigidly maintained; rather, all forms of life are perceived as constituting a unified and interconnected whole. Moreover, Bujo (1992, p. 20) posits that this holistic conception of life is structured hierarchically, reflecting an ordered and relational understanding of existence. In the African worldview, life is understood as participation in God, mediated through a hierarchical order that spans both the visible and invisible realms. In the invisible domain, God occupies the supreme position as the source of life, followed by the founders of clans, who are considered to partake most fully in divine life. Subsequently, tribal heroes, deceased elders, other departed family members, and various spiritual beings, including earthly authorities who straddle the visible and invisible spheres, occupy positions within this hierarchy. These include the king and queen-mother, chiefs of clans, heads of households, and extended family members. Each member of a clan or family bears the dual responsibility of maintaining relations with the deceased while nurturing bonds with the living, who serve as representatives of the ancestors. Bujo (1992, p. 22) emphasises that God, the ancestors, and elders establish societal norms in the form of laws and taboos to ensure communal prosperity. When descendants honour their inheritance and integrate the experiences of their ancestors into their lives, they remain in active communion with both ancestors and living kin, perpetuating the collective history and celebrating the marvels attributed to God. In this framework, virtuous actions enhance communal wellbeing and reinforce the mystical body of the community, whereas transgressions are believed to threaten its cohesion. Unity and interdependence are central to African social ontology. Nürnberger (2007, p. 25) underscores that the human need to belong defines personhood: an individual is fully human only within a network of social relations. Respect for authority, particularly elders, is essential to sustaining communal harmony; disregard for elders undermines one's integration within the community. Hierarchical structures confer elevated status with age, affirming elders' authority and the

continuity of social order. Therefore, personhood in African thought is inseparable from community. Higgs (2010, p. 2417) asserts that an individual's identity is constituted through communal relationships. Nürnberger (2007, p. 25) illustrates that communal integration begins at birth, with rituals marking entry into social life, and continues through adolescence, adulthood, marriage, and death. The community orchestrates each life stage, conferring identity and social meaning. Mbiti (1969, pp. 106–7) elaborates that the African conception of family transcends the nuclear model, encompassing children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, siblings, and their children, alongside deceased ancestors who remain active participants in familial affairs. Neglecting these departed members is believed to invite misfortune, reflecting the enduring relational and spiritual continuity that defines African cosmology and social ethics.

4. Relationship Between African Traditional Religion and Christianity

Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2007, p. 249) emphasises that Christianity's introduction to Africa entailed more than the mere dissemination of a belief system; it was accompanied by a deliberate strategy aimed at transforming African societies. This strategy included the establishment of schools, the promotion of formal education through the production of grammars, dictionaries, and textbooks, and the translation of religious texts. While these contributions significantly impacted African communities and facilitated literacy and education, Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2007, p. 249) asserts that the overarching objective of the Christian missionary enterprise was the Westernisation of Africa. From a Nigerian perspective, Egwuonwu and Emmanuel (2023, p. 1) identify one of the critical limitations of missionary activity as...

...that the Christian missionaries failed to carry out an in-depth study into African belief system hence; they have shallow understanding of it and began to propagate the Gospel to the native people. Most of the native people accepted the exotic faith (Christianity) which encouraged them to forsake and abandon their traditional religion and make the foreign religion cum Western culture their most treasured way of life at the expense of indigenous cultures and traditional religions.

The missionary enterprise in Africa, while impactful in introducing Christianity and formal education, was not without significant challenges, particularly in its deliberate efforts to undermine African cultural practices and indigenous belief systems. Consequently, many continue to regard Christianity as a "white man's religion" (Ngulu 2016, p. 95). In contrast, Mbiti (1969, p. 229) contends that Christianity has a long-standing presence in Africa, predating the arrival of Islam in the seventh century. He further observes that prior to the arrival of European missionaries, regions such as the Congo had already been exposed to Christian teachings. By the mid-nineteenth century, countries including Sierra Leone and Nigeria experienced substantial Christian influence (Mbiti 1969, p. 231). Mbiti (1969, p. 231) therefore concludes that Christianity's enduring presence in Africa is authentically African, indigenous, and traditional. Prozesky (1990, pp. 209, 214) corroborates this historical continuity by noting that religious pluralism has consistently characterised Southern African societies. However, Ntombana (2015, p. 104) highlights a persistent tension among Black members of mainline churches, who navigate dual identities shaped by the Western orientation of Christianity and enduring African ritual practices. Nwadiolor (2016) attributes this phenomenon to the early missionaries' failure to engage with African spiritual concerns such as demon possession and witchcraft, dismissing these elements as unscientific and incompatible with European Christian norms. This neglect contributed to the rise of indigenous prophets and spiritual movements that sought to address local religious and existential needs.

Mokhoathi (2017, p. 1) frames this dynamic as one of syncretism rather than mere pluralism, defining African Christianity as the integration of Christian and African traditional religious elements, whereby each is expressed through the lens of the other. Isizoh (2001, pp. 3, 15) further asserts that African traditional religion (ATR) is not an archaic or museum-bound faith, but a vibrant spiritual system deeply embedded in the consciousness of sub-Saharan Africans. He observes that adherents of ATR often identify concurrently as Christians and turn to traditional practices, prayer houses, prophets, and healers during critical junctures in life (Isizoh 2001, p. 21). Moscicke (2017, p. 132) and Adamo (2011, p. 1) similarly note that many African converts revert to ATR practices when the promises of missionary Christianity appear unfulfilled, underscoring the enduring and pervasive influence of African Indigenous Religion within the continent's spiritual landscape.

5. Methodology and Methods

The article adopts a qualitative research methodology for the purposes of this study. Goethals et al. (2004, p. 1276) assert that qualitative researchers are fundamentally concerned with illuminating social meaning. In a similar vein, Stufflebeam and Coryn (2014, p. 575) contend that qualitative data emerge from, and encompass, a diverse array of techniques designed to capture participants' perspectives and lived experiences through the researcher's direct engagement with both the subjects and their contextual realities.

Cropley (2022, p. 38) identifies several core characteristics that underscore the essence of qualitative research and justify its methodological application. Firstly, qualitative inquiry seeks to understand phenomena, in contrast to quantitative approaches that primarily aim to explain them. Secondly, it prioritises the interpretation of phenomena as they are experienced and understood by research participants. Thirdly, it is oriented toward the discovery of new patterns or general principles of behaviour, as well as the expansion of existing knowledge frameworks. Furthermore, Cropley (2022, p. 38) conceptualises qualitative research through three interrelated dimensions. The ontological dimension concerns the nature and construction of reality. The epistemological dimension focuses on how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences, including their understanding of their roles within their social world and the factors shaping their actions. The methodological dimension emphasises the systematic application of research strategies, such as observation and interviews, through which phenomena are primarily communicated verbally. Data are documented, transcribed, and subjected to interpretive analysis to derive meaning from participants' experiences. The resulting interpretations constitute the study's findings, which may subsequently be related to broader contexts or existing scholarly literature for purposes of analytical generalisation.

5.1. Theoretical Framework

The article employs Social Cognitive Theory as its theoretical framework. Among scholars, Albert Bandura is widely regarded as the principal architect of this theory. This theoretical framework posits that individuals acquire knowledge and behaviours through processes of observation, imitation, and modelling within social contexts. Social Cognitive Theory further maintains that individuals are both products of the social systems in which they are embedded and active agents who reciprocally influence those systems.

Govindaraju (2021, p. 488) reinforces this perspective by asserting that Social Cognitive Theory conceptualises human development as the dynamic interplay of behaviour, environmental factors, and cognitive processes. Central to this approach is the principle that learning occurs not merely through direct experience but also vicariously, as individuals observe the actions, attitudes, and emotional responses of others. Consequently,

social cognitive theorists argue that such observational learning informs the imitation and internalisation of behaviours, thoughts, and affective dispositions, thereby shaping individual development within a broader socio-cultural context.

Bandura (1989, p. 12) adds that:

Within the social cognitive perspective, social factors play an influential role in cognitive development and there are many motivators for the pursuit of competence. Maturational factors and the information gained from exploratory experiences contribute to cognitive growth. However, most valuable knowledge is imparted socially.

It is within this context that scholars such as Gerrand and Nkomo (2021, p. 3103) emphasise the need to foreground the interplay of religious influences, asserting that both Christian and traditional ancestral belief systems exert a profound impact on the decision-making processes of Black South Africans. Masuku (2014, pp. 152–53) attributes this dynamic, in part, to the enduring legacy of colonialism and apartheid, which disrupted indigenous epistemologies and reshaped religious identities. Prior to colonial intervention, African societies practised their own indigenous belief systems, commonly referred to as African Traditional Religion (ATR). Notwithstanding the forces of modernisation and the adoption of other religious affiliations, ATR continues to exert a significant, albeit sometimes implicit, influence on various aspects of African life.

Lundgren and Scheckle (2019, p. 53) further contribute to this discourse by identifying a correlation between the supportive involvement of grandparents and the social behaviour of young people, thereby underscoring the intergenerational transmission of values. Within this analytical framework, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory serves as a guiding lens for the present study, particularly in its emphasis on the role of cognition within processes of socialisation. Baron (2001, p. 249) defines cognition as a psychological construct encompassing thinking and related mental processes. It involves critical functions such as reasoning, judgement, and problem-solving, all of which are central to understanding how individuals interpret and navigate their social realities.

5.2. Paradigm

The article adopts a constructivist (interpretivist) paradigm. The constructivist, or interpretivist, paradigm can be traced to the philosophical foundations of Edmund Husserl and Wilhelm Dilthey. Husserl's phenomenology, concerned with the systematic study of human consciousness and self-awareness, and Dilthey's hermeneutics, focused on the theory and practice of interpretation, collectively inform this paradigm (Chilisa and Kawulich 2012, p. 9). Phenomenological inquiry entails a reflective engagement with lived experience (McGuirk 2014, p. 1), while Reiners (2012, p. 1) emphasises that its primary concern lies in elucidating the meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences. Alase (2017, p. 9) conceptualises Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a methodological approach centred on the exploration of participants' lived experiences. It is particularly concerned with understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of significant life events. IPA proceeds from the assumption that human beings are inherently meaning-making agents; consequently, the articulation of participants' experiential narratives is of central importance. Furthermore, Dammak (2018, p. 6), citing (Cohen et al. 2003, p. 19), underscores the interpretivist position that the social world is most authentically understood through the subjective accounts of individuals, who construct and communicate their realities in their own terms. Accordingly, this paradigm privileges participants' voices, recognising their narratives as indispensable to the interpretive process.

5.3. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this article is to explore the intersections and complexities between African Traditional Religion and Christianity, with particular emphasis on the African philosophy of community as expressed among young adults aged 25–40 years. The subsidiary research questions are as follows: first, to examine the nature of the relationship between the African Traditional religion and Christianity; and second, to analyse the complexities and points of intersection between these traditions among young adults within three mainline congregations in Mamelodi, Pretoria, in South Africa.

6. Results

6.1. “Complexities” and “Complementary”

Within this context, the research participants articulated diverse perspectives regarding their experiences of belonging to the African philosophy of community, noting that such communal affiliation exerts both positive and negative influences on their Christian faith. The findings indicate that aspects of the African philosophy of community may, at times, impede the full expression of Christian beliefs. One significant factor identified by participants is the religious pluralism present within families. Mbiti (1970, p. 30) acknowledges this phenomenon, observing that millions of Africans often adhere to multiple religious traditions, even when formally identifying with major faiths such as Christianity or Islam. Grillo et al. (2019, p. 9) further argue that this inclusivity stems from the inherently fluid nature of African religious systems, which tend to emphasise integration and openness rather than rigid exclusivity. Boundaries between different faith traditions are therefore perceived as ambiguous and permeable.

The study also highlights the transformation of African family structures in the post-colonial era. Traditional patterns where families resided within a single village, spoke a common language, practised similar rituals, and shared one religion have been disrupted by forces such as globalisation, urbanisation, and capitalism, as individuals migrate in pursuit of economic opportunities. Masango (2006, p. 940) observes that these social changes have challenged communal cohesion and traditional values, contributing to the prevalence of violence and abuse in some African families. Despite these shifts, there remains an expectation that individuals participate in communal rituals, particularly African traditional rites, regardless of differing religious affiliations. In the African worldview, the welfare of the community historically takes precedence over individual interests, reinforcing the centrality of communal obligations in shaping personal and religious identity. The following section highlights participants’ views on the impact of belonging to the African philosophy of community.

6.2. Participant’s Experiences About the Complexities Between ATR and Christianity

Presented below are selected participant excerpts that illustrate the complexities associated with belonging within the African philosophy of community, particularly in relation to religious pluralism, which participants have identified as a multifaceted and challenging phenomenon.

“It is both positive and negative to my Christian faith. Generally, for me, my family is incredibly supportive and encouraging. However, I find the practice of cultural practices challenging, especially because there is no open conversation about what they mean or even afforded space by the elders in my family to ask questions. When I ask questions, I am seen as too forward, or being nosy, which is something I struggle with as I often feel being part of these cultural rituals conflict with my Christian faith”. (Mokhutso 2022a, p. 154)

“My situation is very confusing, and confusing to my faith too. My father’s family are very traditional, and when I visit, or there is a family cultural ceremony, I am encouraged to partake because they are part of who I am. On the other hand, on my mother’s side, they are committed Christians, and they always ensure that they encourage me to remain faithful and committed to my Christian faith. With my two families I find myself very confused. So, I am struggling to figure out as to whether to say they are contributing positively or negatively to my Christian faith”. (Mokhutso 2022a, p. 154)

“My family has multiple personalities when it comes to faith. We have those who are staunch traditionalists, as well as staunch Christians. Belonging to such a family has been very confusing to me because as a young person you end up not knowing what to believe or not believe especially because all groups have strong views about their convictions. So, I find that a bit of a challenge, but thanks to my grandmother and uncle who were role models when it comes to my Christian faith, that has kept me going even though at times it becomes tough”. (Mokhutso 2022a, p. 155)

“My family attends Church and are supportive as well as encouraging not only to me but to all my cousins in the family. However, what I am struggling with is that, during family challenges like when we are having too many family deaths, miscarriages, lots of family members being sick, unending conflicts etc. as a family we are encouraged to consult a Sangoma or appease the ancestors. Personally, I find that weird because I am told God is powerful and able, at the same time I am encouraged to seek for assistance elsewhere when the family, myself or other members of the family face challenges. I find that very confusing to me, and I am afraid to question because I may be seen to be disrespectful, and honestly, this affects my faith”. (Mokhutso 2022a, pp. 154–55)

“I come from a family where the older people’s voice is final, and the young are supposed just to be quite and conform. As a young person, in my family, my beliefs do not matter, instead I am expected to do whatever I am told without questioning. That for me I find disabling to my Christian faith”. (Mokhutso 2022a, p. 154)

Masango (2006, p. 939) further elaborates on other factors that come with belonging to the African philosophy of community when saying:

In other words, you cannot live a life of your own; you need other people to help you live life to the fullest. Growing up in the village, the author discovered and came to appreciate that he is a communal being who was and is still nurtured and shaped by the ethos of other villagers. In short, it took the whole village to formulate the authors’ spiritual life. The author’s English saying became a reality when living with others: “no man (sic) is an island”. This process of African spirituality formed and continues to form the author’s moral, ethical, and spiritual world. The author is aware that in the western world, people must respect the privacy and space of an individual and others.

In the following section, the positive dimensions of belonging within the African philosophy of community are examined, as articulated by the participants.

6.3. Participant’s Experiences About Their Positive Experiences

An overview of the research further revealed that key family members, such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles, are regarded by participants as pivotal spiritual mentors in their Christian faith. These relatives, drawing on their own Christian backgrounds, provide

encouragement, guidance, and support, thereby reinforcing the participants' religious formation. In this regard, the African philosophy of community emerges as instrumental in fostering Christian growth and moral development. It continues to function as a platform for instilling ethical values, mentoring, and teaching. Gutierrez et al. (2014, p. 786) assert that individuals within family networks contribute positively to one another's spiritual and religious experiences, even amidst the ideological and social complexities inherent to religion and spirituality.

The study also underscores the significance of communal socialisation in shaping religious choices. Mbiti (1972, p. 54) notes that the corporate nature of the body of Christ resonates with the communal ethos of African culture, and that pre-Christian Africa possessed a rich heritage within which the gospel could be meaningfully contextualised. Within this traditional framework, individuals were mentored and encouraged to uphold their Christian faith. Maseno (2021) highlights that the African emphasis on community illuminates the communal dimension of the gospel, suggesting that engagement with the gospel should enhance communal cohesion in alignment with African cultural norms. Agulanna (2010, p. 288) reinforces this point, asserting that an individual's life attains authentic meaning only within the community.

Gutierrez et al. (2014, p. 779) note that this is unsurprising, as the family constitutes the principal context for religious and spiritual socialisation among Africans. Mokhutso (2022b, p. 3) adds that both family structures and broader society benefit from the guidance of parents and neighbours. Mbiti (1972, pp. 50–52) further contends that exposure to the gospel should serve to enrich and deepen the communal dimensions of African culture. Furthermore, Mbiti (1975, p. 174) emphasises the critical role of elders and the wider community in transmitting values believed to originate from God. Ancestors and spiritual entities are thought to oversee communities to ensure adherence to these moral principles. Consequently, the cultivation of virtuous and ethical conduct has long been central to African cultural and religious life, as neglecting these responsibilities may result in adverse consequences for both individuals and the broader community. The section below further highlights the positive attributes of belonging to the African philosophy of community.

6.4. Participant's Positive Experiences of Belonging to the Community

Presented below are selected participant accounts regarding their experiences of belonging within the African philosophy of community, which have positively influenced their spiritual journeys and provide further context to the complexities inherent in the interaction between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity as a multifaceted phenomenon.

"Yes, it is for me. As mentioned, I am from a family which is deeply committed to the Christian faith. My family's love and commitment have rubbed off on me and the many cousins I have. I have, over the years, been taught and encouraged by my family to follow the Christian faith and commit to it. So, it is an enabler to me." (Mokhutso 2022a, p. 183)

"It does; as I said, my family is in Kwa-Zulu Natal, and I do not feel the distance because of the support I receive when it comes to spiritual support. Each time I call, I am prayed for and even asked how my Christian journey is going. That has been an amazing gift to me. I must say my family have been amazing." (Mokhutso 2022a, p. 184)

"From my father's side, my aunt has played a huge role in my personal development, especially spiritually. She has inspired and encouraged me from an early age; she bought me my first Bible. She was there for me on the day of

my robbing in the youth organization too. I am only singling her out because we are close, but others in my family are so proud of me and how I conduct myself as a young person. Those words and observations have cheered me up” (Mokhutso 2022a, p. 185)

“Yes, my entire family has supported my Christian faith. During my confirmation as a full member of the Maranatha Church of Christ, I had more than one pair of shoes, dresses, and Bibles brought for me by my family. I remember after the service, lunch was prepared for me at home, and the way I was so beautiful, as well as how beautiful the day was, I felt the love shown to me by my family.” (Mokhutso 2022a, p. 186)

“My late father was a minister and has influenced me so much to an extent that I singlehandedly chose the Christian faith. I must say that my father’s character and deep love for everyone, made an impact on the entire family. When the family gathers there is always singing of hymns, and prayers before and after every family gathering. Having a family like that has been a positive influence in my Christian life” (Mokhutso 2022a, p. 157)

“Majority of my families are Christians, and very committed to their Christian faith. Honestly, I have never felt pressured to do anything other than practising my Christian faith” (Mokhutso 2022a, p. 158)

“For me, it has been positive. I come from a family that is very laid back and have given me the freedom to make my own decisions about anything in my life without interfering with or opposing my choices. That has become an incredibly positive experience for me” (Mokhutso 2022a, p. 159)

7. Conclusions

This paper examines the intersections and complexities between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity, with particular emphasis on African philosophy of community. It contends that within African communal life, both positive and negative influences shape the Christian faith of the study’s participants, aged 25 to 40. The findings illustrate that the communal ethos shapes religious identity, moral formation, and spiritual practice, highlighting the dynamic interplay between indigenous belief systems and Christian teachings. Forster (2008) cites Rev. Ross Olivier, who analogises Methodism in Southern Africa to a potted plant. Olivier observes that missionaries introduced the Gospel “in the form of a potted plant,” suggesting that it was initially constrained by foreign contexts. He emphasises that it is the responsibility of Africans “to remove it from the constraints of the pot and plant it in your African soil so that it would be nurtured by African nutrients.” This metaphor underscores the potential for Christianity to be authentically indigenised, allowing African cultural and communal values to nourish and sustain the faith, while simultaneously accommodating the spiritual and ethical frameworks of African traditional thought. In sum, the study affirms that the African philosophy of community continues to exert a profound influence on religious practice, serving both as a medium for spiritual support and as a framework within which tensions and negotiations between ATR and Christianity are navigated.

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