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24 THE AFRICAN VALUE OF COMMUNALITY IN VIRTUAL SPACE AMIDST COVID-19: THE CASE OF WHATSAPP WELFARE COMMUNITIES IN NOMIYA CHURCH, EASTLEIGH

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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 virus crept quickly into Kenya, causing sudden and numerous deaths. Armed with little information on how to inter the bodies of Covid victims, the Ministry of Health issued a directive that “the body must be buried as soon as possible under the supervision of the [healthcare personnel] (HCP), the local health care committee leader and religious leader”.³ Accordingly, the Ministry of Health sought “to provide general guidance and support in management (handling) of the dead in their response to increased deaths associated with the pandemic”, particularly with regard to the disinfection of the surfaces and disposal of the bodies and tissues. Thus, the Ministry’s guidelines were “developed to ensure the protection, dignity and respect for the deceased individuals and their next of kin”.⁴ Adherence to the directive was followed, with close family members buried hurriedly and without the customary rituals. However, most indigenous societies in Kenya have elaborate mourning rituals that accompany the departed to the ancestral world.⁵ As such, hurried burials contravened African indigenous traditions intended to usher our loved ones to ancestorship.

Bereavement from death causes distress to families and friends. Burial rituals, both traditional and religious, accompany the bereaved families in releasing their loved one and also assist the healing process. As a result of the absence of these rituals, mandated by Covid-19 directives that banned social gatherings and normal burial ceremonies, grieving families were left psychologically traumatised by the hurried burials. Further, physical distancing deterred families from visiting their loved ones who were admitted to hospitals due to Covid-19. Quarantines and isolation centres

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3 Ministry of Health (MOH) Kenya. 2020. “Interim guidelines on handling of human remains infected with Covid-19 in Kenya”. Nairobi: MOH. 2 April, 11.

4 MOH, “Interim guidelines on handling of human remains”, 9.

5 See Mbiti JS. 1996. *Introduction to African Religion*. Nairobi/Kampala: East African Educational Publishers; Mugambi J. 1989. “African Heritage: Change and Continuity”, in Ojwang JB and Mugambi JNK (eds). 1989. *The S.M. Otieno Case: Death and Burial in Modern Kenya*. Nairobi: Nairobi University Press, 166-179; Mwiti P. 1999. *Understanding Grief as a Process: An Innovative Journey towards Growth and Reconciliation*. Nairobi: Uzima Publishers.

destabilised people's mental stability.⁶ The mental health threat and ongoing psychological trauma posed by Covid-19 were unrelenting. This being the case, families and individuals continued to grapple with untold grief for their loved ones who departed during the unfortunate period of hurried burials.

Since adversity is the mother of invention, people came up with ways of navigating this saddening situation. The practice of social distancing forced many people stay at home, indoors and away from their coworkers and relations, a situation that caused disruption and harmony in communal life. The communal component deeply that engrained in African people's ethics would have rendered life almost dysfunctional were it not for virtual communities that were facilitated by a growth in internet technology. Sociologist Manuel Castells defines a virtual community as a "self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organised around a shared interest or purpose".⁷ During the pandemic, people took their sociability to the internet, where networking continued remotely. Most families used virtual communities, such as Facebook groups, Zoom meetings, WhatsApp and others, as channels of communication. It is against this backdrop that this chapter examines how the value of communality was appropriated virtually and the effects of these virtual communities in cushioning people's health, well-being and resilience.

This study underlying this chapter employed hybrid ethnographic methods that included participant observation, interviews and virtual ethnography in Nomiya Church, Eastleigh, an African Independent Church in Kenya. The data is a result of a wider research project funded by Nagel Institute, Calvin University, USA, on engaging African realities. The wider project employed a comparative research design, focusing on the African value of communality and religious experiences in the virtual space during the Covid-19 pandemic among churches. Nomiya Church, Eastleigh, the first African indigenous church in Kenya, was selected purposively, since it adopted virtual modes of reaching it members during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nomiya Church was started by Johana Owalo in 1912. From the Kenya National Archives, a letter from the District Commissioner's Office in Central Kavirondo, Kisumu, dated 9 August 1938, records that the religion was "started by one Johana Owala in 1918", and it was originally called the Nomiya Luo Mission. Johana Owala was a trained teacher, who is said to have incidentally taught Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, at the Church Missionary Society (CMS) School in Nairobi. The main tenets of the cult the letter proceeds were: (1) belief in one God (the divinity of Christ is not accepted), (2) total immersion in baptism, (3) male circumcision 8 days after birth, (4) plurality of wives up to four and (5) a claim to preach obedience to

6 Hossain MM, Sultana A and Purohit N. 2020. "Mental health outcomes of quarantine and isolation for infection prevention: a systematic umbrella review of the global evidence", *Epidemiology and Health* 42:e2020038.

7 Castells M. 2000. *The information age: Economy, society and culture – the rise of the network society* vol I. Oxford: Blackwell, 386.

the government.⁸ The church is dominated by Luo ethnic group and is also the first independent church in Kenya to engage in secular education purely for her Nomiya members amidst challenges from the colonialists who wanted every child taught Christianity.⁹ The church can be classified as an Ethiopic or nationalistic movement, as it is both a breakaway group from missionary-led churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church of Kenya, and also a protest group against missionary paternalism and colonial oppressive structures.¹⁰ The majority of the church's adherents come from the western parts of Kenya, such as Nyanza, and they use their local dialect Dholuo, in their church services.¹¹ This explains why church services are conducted in Dholuo even in urban settings such as in Eastleigh, Nairobi. The church's worship is convivial in nature, with dancing, clapping of hands and drum beating. The movement is highly communal, celebrating life together through religious rituals, such as infant baptism, male circumcision and purification.

Since Nomiya Church is a traditional and patriarchal church, a research assistant was recruited to penetrate these distinct hurdles evident in Nomiya Church for the present study. The research assistant had to be male, an ordained minister and someone who speaks Dholuo. In Nomiya Church, women do not take pastoral leadership positions. The seriousness of the stance is depicted in the fact that no women can sit at the altar, but only in the pews. The research assistant and facilitated translations during interviews, though most leaders still opted to speak in Swahili or English.

At Nomiya Church, Eastleigh, oneness and togetherness resulted in solidarity, which gave rise to resilience in dealing with heartbreaking and emotionally draining events, such as hurried burials witnessed during the early days of Covid-19. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section delves into the African value of communality as a moral tradition that expresses compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining a community with justice and mutual caring.¹² The cases in point revolve around hurried burials

8 Letter of the District Commissioner, South Kavirondo, Kisii on African Religions, Nomiya Luo Mission, 19 August 1938. Kenya National Archives, Ref. ADM. 15/17 of 5/8/38.

9 Ndeda MAJ. 2005. "The Nomiya Luo Church: A gender analysis of the dynamics of an African Independent Church among the Luo of Siaya", *Gender, Literature and Religion in Africa*, CODESSRIA Gender Series 4, Dakar, Senegal: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESSRIA).

10 Sudhe SO, Gumo S and Iteyo C. 2015. "The Socio-Cultural and Historical Basis for the Double Rite of Passage in the Nomiya Church in Kenya", *Sociology and Anthropology* 3(9):464-485.

11 For more information on Nomiya Church see Ndeda MAJ. 2011. *The Nomiya Luo Church: A gender analysis of the dynamics of an African Independent Church in Kenya*. Riga: VDM Verlag Dr Müller; Ndeda MAJ. 2003. "Nomiya Luo Church: A Gender Analysis of the Dynamics of an African Independent Church in Siaya District, Kenya, c. 1907 to 1963", *Missionalia* 31(2):239-277; Opwapo M. 1981. *Nomiya Luo Church: The dynamics of an African Independent Church among the Luo of Siaya District*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Nairobi.

12 See conceptualisation of *Ubuntu* by Nussbaum B. 2003. "African Culture and Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African in America", *World Business Academy* 17(1):2.

and the disruption they had on the value of communality as a result of Covid-19. The second section highlights the WhatsApp platform as a medium where virtual communities appropriated the value of communality after Covid-19 disruptions that destabilised peoples' mental well-being. The third section offers a descriptive analysis of these phenomena on the basis of qualitative data from adherents of the Nomiya Church, Eastleigh, and how they employed WhatsApp welfare groups as avenues of solace and accompanying platforms in upholding the value of communality.

AFRICAN VALUE OF COMMUNALITY AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Communality as an African worldview denotes the ability to hold relations, shared worldviews, consciousness, expected and acceptable behavioural patterns and socio-political and socio-economic norms to extend to all levels of societal complexity. African philosophers have debated the African's identity of communitarianism, with each taking diverging arguments though agreeing on the sociality that defines African people.¹³ Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye agree that communality cannot be equated to socialism or collectivism, as we may be lured to think, but that communality in its essence is the intrinsic value, the model personality that defines the undying desire to be one's keeper. It alludes to a warm concern for the well-being of the other.

The African communal ethic embraces the values of oneness, solidarity and well-being. Indigenous Africans express communal feelings, worldviews and moral and cultural values based on closed-knit relationship among their kith and kin within a socio-cultural setting. As an all-encompassing worldview, African communality is convoked in situations and contexts that call for concerted efforts, both good and evil. Philosopher Polycarp Ikuenobe asserts that, "a plausible African communal conception of moral dignity, which is founded on a moral conception of personhood and community, involves a combination of capacity and agency that is conceptually tied to communal responsibility and respect for self and others."¹⁴ To assert this is to argue that human capacities and capabilities are morally good insofar as they are used to promote the moral good of communal well-being on which every individual's well-being or dignity depends.¹⁵ Anything that distorts the balance and congruence in life's realities, such as the Covid-19 pandemic is considered disruptive, hence in need of concerted efforts to ward it off.

13 See Wiredu K and Gyekye K. 1992. *Person and community: Ghanaian philosophical studies* vol I. Washington, DC: Council for Research on Values and Philosophy (CRVP); Dismas Masolo DM. 2019. *African philosophy in search of identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

14 Ikuenobe PA. 2016. "The Communal Basis for Moral Dignity: An African Perspective", *Philosophical Papers* 45(3):438.

15 Polycarp, "The Communal Basis for Moral Dignity", 439.

As Covid-19 ravaged communities, affecting the economic, political, and social well-being of many people, high mortalities and fatalities were witnessed in Nairobi County. Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, was the most affected by the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Kenya registered 340 690 cumulative cases, with Nairobi County leading the other counties at 141 556 (41.5%). The total number of cumulative deaths reported since the beginning of the outbreak is 5 680 and Nairobi County recorded a high of 1 558 (27.2%).¹⁶ Hurried and indecent burials devoid of the usual lengthy mourning periods and rituals became a painful new normal, as bodies were transported from the city to the village for hurried burials. Covid-19 infections surged, causing quarantines, isolations and hospital admissions that not only disrupted the oneness of the community, but also negatively impacted its economic, social and mental well-being. Hospital admissions drained families of their savings, leaving them financially unstable and unable to continue with their normal lives, since Covid-19 prevention protocols, such as handwashing with running water and soap and wearing masks, required money to sustain. Huge hospital bills and bereavements under restrictive conditions challenged the normalised communal manner of solidarity. Social stigma rose, as families whose members were known to have died of Covid-19 were segregated from society for several days. Covid-19 mitigation measures, such as quarantine, isolation, curfews, lockdowns and travel restrictions, resulted in the loss of income, disruptions to daily routines and social isolation, laying the ground for negative mental health outcomes among the populace.¹⁷ Depression and suicide cases spiked mostly among caregivers and those affected as they tried to come to terms with the loss of their patients, parents, spouses, children, friends and co-workers.¹⁸ In all manner of senses, communality and sociality were deeply challenged in the face of a foreign virus.

Hurried burials aggravated the situation. Most bodies were buried at night, wrapped in protective gear and not placed in caskets, as is the norm. In most cases, few or no members of the family were allowed at the burial site, especially at the onset of the pandemic. Only healthcare workers handled the body, which was said to be undignified, as no family members were allowed to dress and view the body as is the norm. In most cultures, when a loved one dies, people seek to grieve and to look for comfort and closure. Burial rituals are believed to offer all this, as they connect the living with the ancestral world – thus, they ought to be conducted respectfully.¹⁹

16 For comprehensive statistics on Covid-19 in Kenya, see Ministry of Health, Kenya. 2022. "Covid-19 Outbreak in Kenya: Daily Situation Report" [Accessed 13 November 2022].

17 Jaguga F and Kwobah E. 2020. "Mental health response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Kenya: a review", *International journal of mental health systems* 14(1):1-6.

18 For an elaborate study on mental health challenges in Kenya during Covid-19 see Angwenyi V et al. 2021. "Mental health during Covid-19 pandemic among caregivers of young children in Kenya's urban informal settlements. A cross-sectional telephone survey", *International journal of environmental research and public health* 18(19):10092.

19 See Mbiti JS. 1990. *African religions and philosophies*. Oxford: Portsmouth N.H. Heinemann Educational Publishers. See also Shino W. 1997. "Death and rituals among the Luo in South Nyanza", *African Study Monographs* 18(3/4):213-228, on spiritual connectedness between the living and the dead and the cycle of life from an African perspective.

But given the Covid-19's disruptive component, some members buried their loved ones "virtually" through Facebook, YouTube and Zoom livestreams. Even though these platforms were an option for purposes of closure and respecting the ancestral spirit world, internet data challenges loomed, leaving a majority of the relatives without the experience of accompanying their loved ones to the very end of their earth's journey. Indecent burials were also blamed on meagre resources, as many people had lost their jobs and others working from home with little or nothing to share. Nevertheless, the virtual platforms offered a ray of solace to grieving families, as virtual communities were formed to facilitate variant social events.

The name "virtual community" was coined by Howard Rheingold, a writer and a teacher who was fascinated by the internet, as the modern communication media that influenced the cultural, social and political milieu. In one of his seminal works, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Rheingold defines virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace".²⁰ For Rheingold, the internet brought people together around shared values and interests that would later form lived experiences. Later sociologists, such as Manuel Castells and online religions renowned scholar Heidi Campbell,²¹ agreed with Rheingold on the nature of the personalised human relationships in a digital common space where experiences are borne online.

The shared values and interests that draw people online are not a result of the internet but are a result of lived experiences that shape human values. Indeed, sociologists Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia point out that those virtual communities are not opposed to physical communities, they are just operating in a particular space with differing dynamics, though still keeping the component of sociability.²² They further argue that virtual communities strengthen the "privatisation of sociability",²³ that is, the building of social networks around the individual both physically and online as guided by one's interests, values and experiences. The African value of communality as a shared value, in this case, becomes a motivating factor to want to connect to a virtual community after Covid-19 disruptions. As people navigated the loneliness and distress, their lone experiences got a platform where they could be shared and be bravely borne.

20 Rheingold H. 1993. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 5.

21 Campbell H. 2010. *When religion meets new media*. London: Routledge; Castells, *The information age*, 404.

22 Wellman B and Gulia M. 1999. "Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone", in Smith MA and Kollock P (eds). *Communities in Cyberspace*. London: Routledge, 167-194.

23 Wellman and Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities", 176.

RELATIONAL THEORY AND AFRICAN SOLIDARITY

The humans desire to connect virtually resonates with the African ethic of Thaddeus Metz.²⁴ Metz, a philosopher and Africanist theorist, upholds a communal framework that infers identity to be a shared component in life where the quality of life for all members is paramount. Metz further argues that care for each other's well-being amounts to the value of solidarity, which is crucial not only in life's sustenance but also in its flourishing. This solidarity he argues involves "promoting others' well-being, being sympathetic, acting for the common good and showing concern for others",²⁵ as well as participating in their grief and joy.

In one of his latest publications, titled *A Relational Theory of Mental Illness: Lacking Identity and Solidarity*, Metz theorises mental illness from a relational perspective of psychological disorders. He argues that "the more one is mentally ill, the more one is psychologically unable to identify with others and exhibit solidarity with them".²⁶ This chapter employs Metz's line of thought that values of communality and solidarity, both from a subjective perspective and a towards the communal dimension, are crucial for mental well-being. Metz draws on the values of harmony, communality and cohesion as foundational for a good life. Even though Metz disassociates himself from the African conception of life and extending to the ancestral worlds in his moral considerations, a true African can never talk of peace and harmony without mentioning forefathers. Metz might have been influenced by his cross-cultural thinking in ways that fail to capture interrelational components of moral actions both among the living and the living-dead. Metz opts to concentrate on the value systems based on harmony. The communality, solidarity and harmony that shape our being is a product of their living. It is a heritage that we continue to shape in the spirit and ethic of *Ubuntu*.²⁷

A renowned archbishop and former chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Desmond Tutu, grounding the ethic of *Ubuntu* among indigenous Africans, maintained, "We say, 'a person is a person through other people'."²⁸ It is not 'I think therefore I am'. It says rather: 'I am human because I belong'. I participate, I share ... Harmony, friendliness, and community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good."²⁹ A community for indigenous Africans includes our ancestors through naming. The living connect directly to the ancestors – the "living dead" believed to be kept alive through their loved ones

24 Metz T. 2021. "A Relational Theory of Mental Illness: Lacking Identity and Solidarity", *Synthesis Philosophica* 71(1):65-81.

25 Metz T. 2013. "The Western Ethic of Care or an Afro-communitarian Ethic", *Journal of Global Ethics* 9(1):81.

26 Metz, "A Relational Theory of Mental Illness", 66.

27 Manda DL. 2007. *The importance of the African ethics of ubuntu and traditional African healing systems for Black South African women's health in the context of HIV and AIDS*. Doctoral Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

28 Tutu D. 1999. *No future without forgiveness*. New York: Random House, 35.

29 Tutu, *No future without forgiveness*, 35.

memory and in rituals – through the names they carry, which are also said to depict their behavioural traits. Thus, contrary to Metz's claims that moral actions are only able to be executed by the living, the values of harmony, solidarity and communality are believed to cut across both worlds: the living and the living dead.³⁰

Metz's relational theory is relevant to the inquiry of this chapter, since mental stress is a natural result of grief of losing a loved one, made worse by indecent send-offs of ancestors that cause psychological disturbance to the living. As Metz alludes, "many mental illnesses cannot be fully understood without referencing such a failure" of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them.³¹ To exercise harmony and communality is therefore a step towards healing, as Metz illuminates in observing,

Exhibiting solidarity with another (or acting for others' good, etc.) is similarly construed as the combination of exhibiting certain psychological attitudes and engaging in helpful behaviour. These specifications of what it is to commune or harmonise with others can ground a fairly rich, attractive, and useable African conception of the good life. Bringing things together, here are some concrete and revealing interpretations of "a person is a person through other persons": one should become a real person, which is a matter of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them; or an agent ought to live a genuinely human way of life (exhibit *ubuntu*), which she can do if and only if she [he] honours relationships of sharing a way of life with others and caring for their quality of life.³²

It therefore follows that if one is unable to self-identify with self and others and exhibit solidarity towards them, because of Covid-19 prevention protocols of quarantine, isolation and social and physical distancing, then a person, as Metz might note, "is not as much of a person as he could and should be".³³ This condition results in a mental health situation that calls for psychosocial accompaniment using all means available.³⁴

Figure 24.1 below is a schematic diagram that Metz utilises to advance his notions of communalism, with an assertion that "all agents must treat others as having dignity

30 For more criticisms on the biased relational theorisation advanced by Metz, see Molefe M. 2017. "Relational ethics and partiality: A critique of Thaddeus Metz's 'Towards an African moral theory'", *Theoria* 64(152):53-76.

31 Metz, "A Relational Theory of Mental Illness", 66.

32 Metz, "A Relational Theory of Mental Illness", 73-74.

33 Metz, "A Relational Theory of Mental Illness", 74.

34 For insights on accompaniment of Covid-19 affected and infected persons, see Musili TK and Cheronoh F. 2021. "Ethical considerations for Community Based Psychosocial Accompaniment: Towards a Strengthened Mental Health Response Amidst Covid-19 Pandemic", *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 4(1):1-10; Musili T and Chamwama E. 2021. "Theology and ethics of pastoral accompaniment for patients with Covid-19 in the context of physical distancing", in Kaunda CJ, Longkumer A, Ross KR and Mombo E (eds). *Christianity and Covid-19: Pathways for Faith*. London: Routledge, 163-176.

in virtue of their capacity to enter in a communal life".³⁵ It is paramount that the value of communality incorporates identity and solidarity.

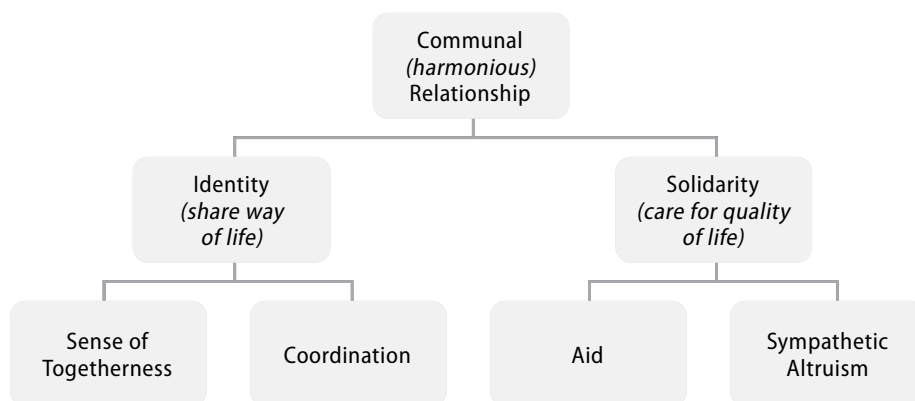


Figure 24.1: Schematic representation of communion (after Metz, 2017)³⁶

WHATSAPP MESSENGER AND THE AFRICAN VALUE OF COMMUNALITY

WhatsApp is an American freeware, cross-platform centralised chat and instant messaging and voice-over service owned by Meta Platforms. It allows users to send text messages and voice messages, make voice and video calls, and share images, documents, user locations and other content using smart mobile phones. Given the versatility of this mode of communication, WhatsApp Messenger has become the most popular messenger application on the African continent. Kenya, for instance, is said to have the highest smartphone usage in Africa, estimated to encompass 74% of the entire population.³⁷ Kenyans are reported to spend close to three to four hours a day on social media, with the most used platforms identified as WhatsApp (74%), Facebook (70%), and Twitter (50%), based on users' own claimed activity.³⁸

During the Covid-19 pandemic season, the platform was awash with useful information on mitigating the rapid spread of the coronavirus, such as washing hands with water and soap, but along with misinformation that caused panic among the populace. Nevertheless, it is a platform that was utilised well in the dire Covid-19 times in a range of ways, from tracking Covid-19 patients to receiving the ministry of health messages on good hygiene and inoculation tests. Given its promptness in communication, WhatsApp has an intergenerational following, including both the young and the old.

35 Metz T. 2017. "Replacing Development: An Afro-Communal Approach to Global Justice", *Philosophical Papers* 46(1):118.

36 Metz, "Replacing Development", 118.

37 Namunwa K. 2019. "Kenya leads Africa in Smartphone usage", *Business Today*, 19 March.

38 "Opinion. 2021. Social Media Platforms, Influencers and Internet Technology; Will Largely Influence the 2022 General Election Outcome", *Shahidi News*, 19 October.

The WhatsApp platform can send messages to one person or groups. WhatsApp groups form a virtual community of persons, family, friends, employees and all sorts of people sharing the same points of view. Social events are also organised and planned using WhatsApp platforms. A “virtual community” following the definition of sociologist Manuel Castells, occurs where a self-defined electronic network of interactive communication is organised around a shared interest or purpose, and this fits perfectly with the role that the WhatsApp platform plays for these communities. During Covid-19, communities assembled in WhatsApp groups to plan for pre-weddings, weddings and burials, as well as to cushion the strain on families in paying hospital bills prompted by the pandemic. It is against this backdrop that we examine how the WhatsApp platform advanced the value of communality virtually and its subsequent manifestations in cushioning people’s health, well-being, and resilience for adherents of Eastleigh Nomiya Church, Nairobi County.

WHATSAPP VIRTUAL BEREAVEMENT COMMUNITIES AT EASTLEIGH NOMIYA CHURCH

The present study examines how the value of communality was appropriated virtually and its subsequent manifestations in cushioning people’s health, well-being, and resilience among the Eastleigh Nomiya Church adherents. The church has an approximate population of 144 adult adherents and 56 children. Of 144 adult adherents, about 42% are men, while women are the majority at 58%. Notably, the majority of men had smartphones compared to women. Men dominate the leadership of the church, which is a key reason why Eastleigh Nomiya Church had a continuous presence in the virtual space. Livestreaming of services through Facebook was evidenced on the Eastleigh Nomiya Church Facebook page.³⁹ It was reported that, even though a Facebook page existed prior to Covid-19, a WhatsApp group for the entire church was created at the onset of the pandemic for communication purposes. After physical church attendance was prohibited, the WhatsApp platform became an efficient channel for the church leadership to reach out to the adherents. Communication and updates on one another’s well-being and challenges were posted to the group. The bishop opined that communicating to church members about when to collect foodstuff, bereavement cases, sickness and Covid-19 infections were made easier among the adherents by the WhatsApp platform.

The Luo community exhibits elaborate funeral rituals.⁴⁰ They perform a series of rituals and many feasts for the dead because of their strong fear and respect for the dead, and these rituals were disrupted by Covid-19 pandemic protection protocols.

39 See Eastleigh Nomiya Church, *Facebook* [Accessed 28 November 2022].

40 See Otieno O, Ayako R, and Kandago D. 2021. “Luo rituals pertaining to ancestral spirits’ veneration and their implication on christian worship – a study in the seventh-day Adventist church, Kenya lake conference”, *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 4(1): 28-42; Shino W. 1997. “Death and rituals among the Luo in South Nyanza”, *African Study Monographs* 18:213-228.

The Kenyan government, through the Ministry of Health (MOH) press release of 6 March 2020,⁴¹ banned with immediate effect all meetings, conferences and events where more than fifteen people would be gathering. Further, the Kenyan government issued a directive that interment must be conducted within 72 hours,⁴² which worsened the financial burden to grieving families, who were no longer able to reach out to friends for support owing to time constraints and the ban on social gatherings. One Eastleigh Nomiya Church member opined, "We could not attend the burials of our loved ones, but a WhatsApp group was formed, where we contributed and sent to our brothers just to soothe them. You know the hospital people just came and buried him immediately."⁴³

WhatsApp welfare communities emerged to cushion people not only financially, but also emotionally. Asked how the platform was of importance to them during mourning period, one respondent opened his phone and shared with researchers condoling messages that the other members of the church and from the wider community had shared in the WhatsApp group. The experience concurs with the observations of Johannes Cronje and Izak van Zyl, information and communication technologists, that "WhatsApp groups are considered useful for creating and supporting virtual communities".⁴⁴ Even though the virtual community on WhatsApp was not the same as in-person mourning rituals, the members asserted that it was a source of relief during the pandemic. Mobile money was another virtual venture that supported families during the pandemic, attesting to the value of communality that existed beyond the physical. Unlike previously, when mobile money platforms were largely used for person-to-person cash transfers, they were increasingly being used to support the welfare of family members within the church. The bishop explained, "Most of our members lost their jobs when this pandemic came in. They have wives and children to feed. We, as the church leadership, created a WhatsApp group and asked members to send money to the treasurer. We then used this money to buy food for our people. They would come one by one and collect from the church."⁴⁵ Thus, the use of social media enhanced giving of finances and other material things in different congregations a fact that fosters maturity of believers and enhanced spirituality.⁴⁶ Eastleigh Nomiya Church is a giving church. Church members give money towards various social events ranging from burials, hospital bills, graduations and family welfare upkeep. This is done together with a thanksgiving offering, development fund and tithes. WhatsApp and mobile money applications have been lauded for "contributing to the empowerment of women

41 Ministry of Health, Kenya. 2020. "Update on Covid-19 as at 6 March". Nairobi: MOH.

42 See MOH, Interim guidelines on handling of human remains".

43 Interview with Kayole pastor by T Musili, Nairobi, Kenya, October 2021.

44 Cronje J and Van Zyl I. 2022. "WhatsApp as a tool for Building a Learning Community", *Electronic Journal of e-Learning* 20(3):296.

45 Interview with Bishop of Eastleigh Parish by T Musili, Nairobi, Kenya, November 2021.

46 Kamau P, Kama J, Mwaura N and Njau M. 2019. "Effect of Utilisation of WhatsApp Social Media Platform on Spiritual Growth of Church Members a Case of New Life Church Kenya", *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 3(5):347-351.

by enabling their freedoms to participate in developmental activities".⁴⁷ Eastleigh Nomiya Church leveraged these platforms during the pandemic. On one Sunday, for instance, it was observed that they had seven giving sessions. Every member was recorded in a book, for what was said to be accountability purposes. Once a contributor gave a certain amount, the person in charge of collection and writing would shout the name of the contributor and the amount. Other members opted to contribute through the WhatsApp group, for fear of shaming when the name and amount were mentioned.

The sharing and willingness to give however little money they had to these many social events was, however, a way of identifying with the grieving and showing solidarity with them. One woman observed, "Even if you have Kshs 200, give Kshs 50, 50 to each, at least you have your name in the book or in the WhatsApp group. It is a sign you are together and you belong to the church."⁴⁸ As Thaddeus Metz has observed, identity and solidarity are key factors that necessitate the well-being of persons. It is thus evident that new electronic media does not depart from or disrupt traditional cultures, but rather absorbs and appropriates them. The virtual communities formed as a result of grief, for instance, are not just for Eastleigh Nomiya Church adherents, but also draw membership from other institutions, as per the web of relationships that the affected belong to. Robert Putnam, an American political scientist, and educator refers to this web of relationships as "social capital", denoting the element of communities that forms affective bonds among people.⁴⁹ These relationships come in handy in times of need, since they can generate broader identities and reciprocity.

WhatsApp communities have become a norm not only in the Eastleigh Nomiya Church, but also in most societies in Kenya and across the globe. They are centred on shared norms, values and interests of all kinds. Eastleigh Nomiya Church leadership reported forming a lifelong WhatsApp welfare group for all church members for purposes of communication and eventualities. Since Covid-19 is easing up at the time of this writing, the groups are realised partially in the digital common space, but they also supported physically through the church welfare book, forming hybrid-facilitated welfare. The Eastleigh Nomiya Church WhatsApp groups are a testament to the vision of Howard Rheingold, in his pioneering book on virtual communities, because they exemplify the birth of a new form of community, bringing people together online around shared values and interests was necessitated by the pandemic.⁵⁰

47 For more on WhatsApp as an empowering tool, see Abubakar NH and Dasuki SI. 2018. "Empowerment in their hands: use of WhatsApp by women in Nigeria", *Gender, Technology and Development* 22(2):164-183.

48 Interview with woman church member by T Musili, Nairobi, Kenya, November 2021.

49 Putnam P. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 24.

50 Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*.

A virtual community, in line with Rheingold's vision, is generally understood as a self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organised around a shared interest or purpose, although sometimes communication becomes the goal in itself. Probed on how they maintained harmony with the ancestral world, given the elaborate nature of mourning among the Luo, the bishop, who always attended the burials on behalf of the entire parish responded, "Our God is one, he is understanding, our parents, brothers and sisters who have gone ahead of us are friendly and sympathise with us going through Covid-19. They understand. It is not our fault, they see we are doing our best."⁵¹ The bishop's sentiments testify to the unity between the living dead and the living even in a technological age. As ancestors live among us, they were privy to the challenges the pandemic posed, thus confirming Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia's point that virtual communities are never opposed to physical communities, but rather should be understood as different forms of community with dynamic and distinct rules that interact with other forms of community. It thus follows that the living dead have a certain form of community, which is not detached from both the physical and virtual communities that serve their interests for the sake of identity and harmony.

So, in the end, one wonders whether virtual communities are real physical communities. Though they may not meet the physicality that they mimic, they are not unreal in terms of communality and solidarity, which are the driving human concerns in times of adversity. They do not exist in isolation from other forms of sociability, such as encounters, exchanges and interactions that ground opinions, attitudes and values. As communication is crucial in sociability, there is minimal or no separation at all between physical reality and the symbolic representation of the living dead and living communities. The Nomiya Church bishop alluded to this oneness as the ancestral community that is always living in our midst, understanding every real happening in society. Manuel Castells was therefore correct with his assertion that "there is no separation between 'reality' and symbolic representation. In all societies, humankind has existed in and acted through a symbolic environment".⁵² Sheldon Richmond, a philosopher and information technology systems analyst, further confirms that virtual space "is a system in which reality itself (that is, people's materials/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in virtual settings in the world of make-believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience".⁵³

All realities are thus communicated through symbols. One church elder whose son had passed on explained, "We sent them (referring to church members) photos of his face, casket, and the grave. They have accepted that he died. They could see him lay peacefully, he never disturbed us." As if to say that even the ancestors

51 Interview with Bishop Eastleigh Parish by T Musili, Nairobi, Kenya, November 2021.

52 Castells, *The information age*, 403.

53 Richmond S. 2020. *A way through the global techno-scientific culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 34.

accepted him, “the laying peacefully and not disturbing them” is a testament that even though the rituals were not performed as expected, the virtually mediated assistance was enough. Thus, the reality of spiritual community online and its situated theologising was necessitated by the WhatsApp platform.⁵⁴ This is to say that in human life, in interactive communication, regardless of the medium, all the symbols convey meaning and an experience. In a sense, all reality can be and was virtually perceived. The WhatsApp platform had thus become the foundation for appropriating identity and solidarity in moments of adversity and beyond. It can be through words and *emojis* that express compassion, reciprocity, harmony and communality, values that are crucial for mutual caring both to the living and the living dead.

CONCLUSION

This chapter examined how the value of communality was appropriated virtually and its subsequent manifestations in cushioning people’s health, well-being and resilience. Relational theory grounded the importance of identity and solidarity within African ethics, which extends beyond physicality to the virtual space. From the qualitative data, the WhatsApp platform was utilised to continue the African value of communality during the pandemic. Virtual communities, appropriated through social media, were powerful tools in combatting painful experiences and mental health challenges prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic. WhatsApp communities continued to service as platforms for communication and welfare spaces forming a formidable social capital for the community even as the pandemic was subsiding. The value of communality, as grounded in African ethics, survived Covid-19 and continues to blend well with technological innovations beyond this life. Its appropriation in social media platforms is a testament that communitarianism, as drawn from the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, lives on, even under legal regulations and disruptive pandemics in a technological space as a healing tool for psychological pain and grief.

54 See Silverkors D. 2020. “Four Lessons I’ve Learned So Far in the Wake of the Pandemic”, in Campbell HA (ed). *The distanced church: Reflections on doing church online*. College Station, TX: Digital Religion Publications/Texas A & M University. Online at <https://jlfllc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Distanced-Church-PDF-landscape-FINAL-version.pdf> [Accessed 28 November 2022].