A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF UBUNTU'S RADICAL COMMUNITARIANISM IN MITIGATING SUICIDE PHENOMENON

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Abstract*:* ***Suicide remains a growing public health concern across the African continent, often exacerbated by socio-economic pressures, cultural stigmas, and insufficient mental health infrastructure. Dominant interventions tend to emphasize individual-centered, biomedical models that may neglect the communal and relational dynamics central to many African worldviews. This paper critically examines Ubuntu's radical communitarianism as a philosophical and ethical framework for mitigating suicide. Grounded in the principle of* "I am because we are"*, Ubuntu emphasizes collective identity, mutual care, and shared responsibility-values that could foster belonging, reduce isolation, and build informal support networks. The paper explores the extent to which Ubuntu's communitarian ethos offers a culturally grounded alternative to prevailing mental health paradigms. However, the analysis also highlights significant tensions: the potential for communal norms to suppress individual suffering, reinforce conformity, or marginalize dissenting voices. The paper argues that while Ubuntu's communitarianism holds promise as a culturally resonant tool in suicide prevention, its application must be critically adapted to contemporary contexts marked by urbanization, migration, and changing social values. Ultimately, the study calls for a hybrid model that integrates Ubuntu's relational ethics with rights-based, individual-sensitive mental health care.*

Keywords: *Bantu, Communitarianism, Ubuntu, Suicide*

Introduction

It is a fact that the loss of Ubuntu's moral values and cultural identity among the modern African people, driven by colonization, globalization, and modernization, has had significant psychological and social consequences, contributing to the phenomenon of mental health challenges. This is why addressing this issue requires a nuanced approach that acknowledges the historical roots of cultural dislocation and modern understanding while leveraging the strengths of Bantu traditions to promote mental well-being. This paper evaluates the Ubuntu's radical or extreme communitarianism. The whole point is that, in order to mitigate suicide phenomenon in todays changed modern world, there is need for a new version of African communitarianism which focusses on the agency of the individual first, with the community existing in harmony with the individual.

1.1. An Overview of Suicide Crisis

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over 703,000 people die by suicide each year, equating to one in every 100 deaths worldwide.[1] The global suicide rate stands at approximately 9.0 per 100,000 people, though this figure varies based on region and demographic factors.[2] In some countries, suicide ranks among the top three causes of death for individuals aged 15-44. However, this statistic excludes suicide attempts, which occur up to 20 times more frequently than completed suicides.[3]

According to M. K. Nock, "Suicide is an enormous public health and social problem in the United States and around the world. Each year over 34,000 people in the United States and approximately 1 million people worldwide die by suicide, making it one of the leading causes of death."[4] Suicides rates vary across regions, with some countries reporting higher rates than others. Vulnerable populations, including youth, LGBTQ+ individuals and those facing socioeconomic challenges, are disproportionately affected by suicide and the COVID-19 crisis worsened mental health issues, causing more stress, isolation, and financial difficulties, which in turn led to an increase in suicide rates in certain areas.[5] However, suicides alone are not the whole story. Survivors of suicide attempts outnumber those who die, often facing severe injuries that necessitate medical attention.[6] As previously mentioned, each year, over 34,000 individuals in the United States die by suicide, while more than 376,000 people with self-inflicted injuries receive treatment in emergency departments.[7]

While suicide was once considered rare in Africa, recent studies indicate it as a notable public health concern.[8] Young people, particularly adolescents and young adults, are considered a vulnerable group for suicide risk, influenced by factors such as unemployment, poverty, conflict and insufficient access to mental health services. Evidence suggests that suicide rates are also increasing in African cultures, with most cases driven by overwhelming social factors. According to Schlebusch, contributors to suicidal behavior include stigma, discrimination, social isolation, lack of familial and social support, and the loss of loved ones due to HIV/AIDS.[9] Although data is scarce, indications suggest that suicide rates are increasing across many African cultures. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as cited by Kizito Makoye, a person dies by suicide every 40 seconds worldwide, amounting to approximately 700,000 deaths annually.[10] In Africa, the suicide rate stands at 11 per 100,000 people, exceeding the global average of nine. African men face particularly high risks, with 18 suicides per 100,000 significantly higher than the

[1] World Health Organization, *Suicide*, (2024), accessed on 3/06/24, http://www.who.int/topics/suicide/en/.

[2] World Health Organization, *Suicide*, (2024), accessed on 5/06/24, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide.

[3] World Health Organization, *Suicide*, (2024), accessed on 05/06/24, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact sheets/detail/suicide.

[4] M.K. Knock, "Suicide and Suicide Behaviour Epistemological Reviews" (2008), accessed on 2/06/24 in http://academic.op.com./lepirev/article/30/1/1/133/6

[5] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Suicide facts at a glance (2008), accessed on 5/6/2024, http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/Suicide-DataSheet- a.pd

[6] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Suicide facts at a* glance (2008), accessed on 5/6/24, http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/Suicide-DataSheet- a.pd

[7] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Suicide facts at a glance,* (2008), accessed on 5/6/2024, http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/Suicide-DataSheet- a.pd

[8] L. Schlebusch, S. Burrows & N. Vawda, Suicide prevention and religious traditions on the African continent. In D. Wasserman and C. Wasserman (Eds.) *Suicidology and suicide prevention: A global perspective,* (Oxford England: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63.

[9] S. L. Schlebusch, S. Burrows & N. Vawda, *Suicide prevention and religious traditions on the African continent*, 63.

[10] Kizito Makoye, *Africa's Mental Health Crisis: World's Highest Suicide Rates and Lowest Spending on Mental Health Services*, (2024) accessed on 10/02/25, https://healthpolicy-watch.news/tanzania-clergy-suicides-spotlight-africas-mental-health-crisis/#:~:text=Africa%20has%20the%20highest%20suicide,

global male average of 12.2. Experts caution that the true figures may be even higher due to gaps in data collection and underreporting.[11] That is why amidst the many strategies and approaches predominantly shaped by Western world, the research will embark on a journey to explore the potential of Ubuntu's moderate communitarianism, a distinctive African philosophical concept, as a comprehensive antidote to the challenges of suicide in Africa particularly among the Bantu people.

1.2. Ubuntu and African Communitarianism

Ubuntu, an African ethical philosophy, embodies an ontological-communal understanding of personhood.[12] Originating from the Nguni (isiZulu) aphorism: *Ubuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*, which translates to 'a person is a person through others.'[13] Ubuntu as humanness emphasizes human dignity, equality, universal kinship, sanctity of life, and communal living. Archbishop Desmond Tutu highlighted Ubuntu's qualities, such as resilience, compassion, sharing, human dignity, and mutual support, essential in fostering just and caring communities, an experience closely intertwined with the lives of Bantu people wherever they reside.[14]

Ubuntu's core principle rests on the belief in harmony within oneself, social structures, the cosmos, and humanity's connection to the Absolute Being.[15] A Bantu individual's personhood finds fulfillment by actively engaging in the community. This philosophy encourages adherence to outlined communal values, enhancing their collective functioning.[16] Though originating in Southern Africa, Ubuntu has spread across the continent, embodying communal care, harmony, hospitality, respect, and responsiveness, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human existence. Tutu encapsulates this with his famous maxim, *Ubuntu ngamuntu ngabantu*, signifying that an individual's existence is intrinsically relational to the community.[17] Arockia Raj describes a community as a group of individuals who either reside in the same location or share common characteristics.[18] From this perspective, communitarianism can be understood as an ideology that highlights the significance of community, social relationships, and shared values in shaping individual identity, moral beliefs, and social structures. According to Coetzee and Roux, African communitarianism consists of:

> a group of persons linked by interpersonal bonds, biological and/or non-biological, who consider themselves primarily as members of the group and who have common interests, goals and values. The notion of common interest and values is crucial to an adequate conception of community, the notion in fact defines the community. It is the notion of common interest, goals and values that differentiate a community from a mere association of individual persons. Members of a community share goals and values. They have intellectual and ideological, as well as

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[11] Kizito Makoye, *Africa's Mental Health Crisis*, 2024.

[12] Munyarazi Felix Murove, "Beyond the Savage Evidence Ethic: A Vindication of African Ethics*,"* *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics* (KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 26.

[13] Murove, "*Beyond the Savage Evidence Ethic*, 56.

[14] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness: A Personal Overview of South African's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (London: Rider Random House, 2000), 35.

[15] Elle, *The Perception of Suicide in Igbo Religion,* 65.

[16] Ifeanyi Menkiti, Person and Community in African Traditional Thought*" in African Philosophy: An Introduction,* ed. Richard Write (Maryland: Lanham, 1984), 171.

[17] Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness,* 35.

[18] Arockia Raj, Contractarianism and the ethics of care in Indian fiction. *In Security, Socialisation and Affect in Indian Families* (Routledge, 2016), 2.

emotional, attachment to those goals and values; as long as they cherish
them, they are ready to peruse and defend them.[19]

Communitarianism can be understood primarily as a shared space where individuals coexist. It also encompasses a group of people who not only live in the same environment but also share common interests and are interconnected through social relationships. African communitarianism is well captured in John Mbiti's concept of the African worldview: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."[20] This perspective emphasizes that an individual's existence is intrinsically tied to the community, embodying the essence of Ubuntu. A key debate stemming from this view is whether a person is entirely defined by their social relationships, a position advocated by radical or extreme communitarianism.

1.3. Ubuntu's Radical Communitarian Ethics

The preceding section highlighted that Ubuntu morality is deeply rooted in interactions both with fellow humans and the divine. In traditional Bantu societies, an individual's actions or behaviors are evaluated as moral or amoral based on their impact on the community.[21] Rather than labeling a person as inherently good or bad, morality is seen in terms of actions that yield either positive or negative consequences for the community. Mbiti buttresses this view as he emphasizes that an action can be considered good in one context and evil in another, depending on its effect on communal harmony.[22]

From Ubuntu's radical communitarianism perspective, moral principles focus on fostering good relationships rather than emphasizing justice and individual rights, as seen in Western thought.[23] As far as Ubuntu's radical communitarianism is concerned, what unites people is deemed right, while actions that cause division are considered wrong. Ubuntu's radical communitarianism morality reflects this by being both naturalistic and humanistic, addressing human needs and interests within the framework of communal living. Therefore, one would say that Ubuntu's radical communitarianism morality centers on community life and social welfare, prioritizing the well-being of the whole community.

Goodness, in Ubuntu's radical communitarianism thought, is defined by acts that promote harmony and avoid harm. This being the case, morality is inherently social, with the community's well-being taking precedence. This is why, in Bantu traditional religions, immorality is understood within the context of the individual's inseparable connection to the community. This means that every person is expected to act in ways that benefit society as a whole, as the actions of one person inevitably affect the group, and vice versa. This interconnected worldview is encapsulated in Mbiti's renowned statement: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."[24] A key characteristic of Ubuntu's radical communitarianism morality is its emphasis on humanism and community, aligning with the interests of people and ensuring harmonious coexistence. The functioning of a community in pursuing shared interests is central to Ubuntu morality. Nel articulates this clearly, stating that, "community in the African context is the basis for morality in that it guarantees the well-being of both the individual and the community."[25] This sentiment is echoed by Ikuenobe, who emphasizes the foundational role of community, personhood, and collective well-being as cornerstones of African moral thought. The essence of African morality

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[19] Coetzee and Roux, eds. *The African Philosophy reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 320.

[20] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 68.

[21] Shutte, *Philosophy for Afric*a, 85.

[22] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 26.

[23] Menkiti, *Persons and community*, 171.

[24] Mbiti, African *Religions and Philosophy*, 26.

[25] P.J. Nel, Morality and religion in African Thought, *Acta Theologica*, 2 (2008): 88.

lies in its prioritization of community welfare, with African societies structuring their social lives around communality, solidarity, and mutual care.[26]

A distinctive feature of the Ubuntu ethical framework is the emphasis on character. A person's character, defined by the presence or absence of virtue, serves as a measure of moral standing. Mbiti again notes that "the African moral system is a morality of conduct rather than a morality of being…man is not by nature either good or bad (evil) except in terms of what he does or does not do to the community."[27] This distinction is vital for understanding Ubuntu morality, where actions are judged based on their impact on communal well-being. Gyekye reinforces this idea, describing good character as the essence and central pillar of African moral systems. Social welfare, therefore, emerges from the collective good conduct of individuals.[28] This is why, proverbs such as "a person is a person through other persons" and "I am because we are" not only reflect metaphysical insights but also serve as evaluative statements. Actually, they prescribe the ideal of becoming a true person, living in a way that supports the community's survival and thriving. In this context, one's character is of utmost importance.

Closely linked to character is the concept of personhood. As it has been alluded to, in Ubuntu's radical communitarianism, personhood is not innate but earned. A person is deemed moral not because of his inherent qualities like reason, emotions, or language but because of his ability to receive moral education and contribute to the community's welfare.[29] Nel argues that humanness, within the African cultural framework, is affirmed through fellowship with others. For this reason, children are not considered full persons until they have acquired the moral education necessary for social welfare and communal living.[30] Ikuenobe supports this view, asserting that moral personhood involves the capacity to balance the needs of others with one's own, to feel guilt, shame, or remorse, and to exhibit moral sensitivity.[31] While misconduct does not strip a person of his humanness, it can lead to social censure and a loss of respect if their actions undermine the community's welfare and solidarity.[32] This underscores why significant effort is made to cultivate and uphold moral character within the communal framework.

In Bantu societies, children are socialized to become morally responsible adults within the normative social framework. Ubuntu morality places a strong emphasis on duty and responsibilities over individual rights and duty refers to the obligations individuals must fulfill to contribute to the welfare of the community, while rights are the entitlements individuals expect from the community for their comfort and well-being.[33] Gyekye highlights that the African communitarian society emphasizes morality grounded in duty to others and the community, forming the basis of moral responsibilities and obligations. In situations that demand complete responsibility, individual rights are often set aside or deferred.[34] For instance, someone experiencing a personal crisis, such as suicidal thoughts, might still be expected to prioritize his

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[26] P. Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on communal and Morality in African traditions* (Lanham: Lexington Books), 45.

[27] Mbiti, African *Religions and Philosophy*, 26.

[28] Kwame Gyekye, *Traditional and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press), 17.

[29] I. A Menkiti, *Person and Community in African Thought. African Philosophy: An Introduction* (University Press of America, 1984), 101.

[30] P.J. Nel, *Morality and Religion in African Thought*, 33.

[31] Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on communal and Morality in African traditions*, 45.

[32] Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on communal and Morality in African traditions*, 45.

[33] H. Verhoef and C. Michel. Studying Morality within the African Context: A Model of Moral Analysis and Construction. *Journal of Moral Education*, 26, no. 388 (1997): 398.

[34] K. Gyekye, *Philosophy, Culture and Vision. African Perspectives. Selected Essays* (Accra, Sub-Sahara Publishers, 2013), 55.

duties. A man in such a crisis might be condemned for neglecting his responsibilities as a husband, father, or family member, as his actions could be seen as abandoning his obligations to uphold the family's honor and well-being. Ubuntu's radical communitarianism can thus be described as a community-centered mindset that prioritizes the group's welfare over that of the individual. While individuality and a sense of self are acknowledged, they are distinct from individualism, which promotes self-interest at the expense of others. This concept is incompatible with Ubuntu's radical communitarian morality. The communal Bantu worldview inherent in Ubuntu radical communitarianism contrasts with the individualistic and self-centered tendencies often seen in Western cultures. In Ubuntu, the individual's interests are subordinate to the group's, with the community focusing on ensuring the well-being of each member through collective solidarity. This solidarity encourages individuals to align their actions, loyalties, and goals with the community's needs.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes Ubuntu as emphasizing wholeness and compassion, highlighting qualities such as warmth, hospitality, generosity, and a willingness to share. Ubuntu represents a communitarian morality where the ultimate goal is dignity, achieved through personal growth and fulfillment within the community.[35] Participation in the community is both the means and the end of this moral framework. Everything that enhances personal dignity and community participation is considered good, while anything that undermines it is deemed bad.[36] Ubuntu's moral vision intrinsically ties human happiness and fulfillment to life within the community. Personal fulfillment is not pursued in isolation but through collective well-being, as true fulfillment is thought to be achievable only within the community. This view is corroborated by Mbiti as he argues that, participation in the community is necessary not just for personal fulfillment but also for the community's collective success.[37] By and large, in the Ubuntu's radical communitarianism worldview and morality, the individual is seen as part of an interconnected whole, where treating others as oneself fosters patience, tolerance, and inclusivity. There is no separation between individual good and community good since everything is shared for the collective benefit. This mindset is the foundation for Ubuntu's classless society, emphasizing shared responsibility and mutual respect among all members.[38]

1.4. Ancestral Reverence and Continuity of Life

Ubuntu societies hold a strong belief in the presence of ancestors, who are considered guardians of life. The living are expected to honor them through ethical living, respect for nature, and upholding societal values. Life is seen as a continuum, where the past, present, and future generations are interconnected. Various African customs emphasize the protection of life. Naming ceremonies, initiation rites, and marriage rituals often include prayers and sacrifices to ensure longevity, health, and prosperity. Rituals surrounding birth and death reflect a deep reverence for life's sacred cycle, reinforcing the belief that life must be preserved and honored. The sacredness of life in Ubuntu societies is not just a moral principle but a way of living that ensures the dignity, unity, and well-being of individuals and communities.

1.5. Community life and Suicide Prevention

As previously mentioned, in African tradition, the term 'community' refers not only to an existing society or group but also to an ideal that defines how members should relate to one another other.[39]

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[35] Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 49.
[36] Broodryk, *Understanding South Africa*, 23.
[37] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 233.
[38] Shutte, *Philosophy for Afric*a, 31.
[39] T. Metz, The Western ethic of care or an Afro-communitarian ethic? Specifying the right relational morality, *Journal of Global Ethics* 9 no.1(2013): 77.

Many communities that continue to uphold traditional values and principles still adhere to the tenets of Ubuntu. Some may even argue that Ubuntu cannot exist outside of community.[40] From birth to death, Africans are inherently part of a communal network.

Bantu societies place great emphasis on collective well-being, interconnectedness, and communal values, which both pose challenges and provide opportunities in addressing suicide. One major challenge in understanding suicide within Bantu culture is the deep stigma attached to self-harm.[41] In these societies, suicide is considered a shameful act, often intended as a deterrent. Members are taught that death is not an end but a transition to another realm, ultimately leading to a reunion with ancestors. Because of this belief, suicide results in a loss of respect and status, bringing dishonor to both the individual and their family.

In Bantu cultures, the well-being of the community takes precedence over individual concerns, as personal actions are seen as directly affecting the entire community.[42] Suicide is often regarded as a violation of communal values, bringing shame and dishonor to both the individual's family and the wider society. Despite these challenges, Bantu cultures also provide opportunities for intervention through strong communal bonds and support networks. Those experiencing distress often turn to their community for help, as Ubuntu emphasizes interconnectedness and mutual care. When properly equipped with awareness and resources, these communal support systems can serve as a vital foundation for identifying and assisting individuals at risk of suicide.

In Bantu cultures, suicide is not viewed as a private matter but as one that affects the entire community.[43] This broader understanding highlights both the obstacles to prevention and the potential support mechanisms available. Traditional Bantu societies hold that individual well-being is deeply tied to the well-being of the community, ancestors, and future generations. Thus, any action, including suicide, is seen as having far-reaching consequences that affect the collective.[44] The principle of Ubuntu, which highlights interconnectedness and shared responsibility, is fundamental to Bantu cultures. Community well-being takes precedence, and individual actions are assessed based on their impact on the collective. This communal perspective creates opportunities for addressing suicide through early intervention, support, and collective care. A central aspect of Ubuntu is mutual respect and support. In traditional Bantu culture, people were expected to show compassion and empathy toward one another, reinforcing the belief that all individuals are deeply connected. This fostered a strong sense of unity and solidarity within the community.

Regarding Ubuntu and suicide, taking one's own life was seen as a serious violation of communal values, disrupting the harmony and interconnectedness of society.[45] The effects extended beyond the individual, bringing shame and blame upon their family and community, as suicide was perceived as a failure to uphold one's responsibilities to the group. It was considered an

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[40] R. Dolamo, Botho/Ubuntu: The Heart of African Ethics, Scriptura 112 (1): 1 – 10. Enslin, P., and Horsthemke, K. (2004). Can Ubuntu provide a model for citizenship education in African democracies? Comparative Education, 40 (2013): 545.

[41] J. M. Lister and R. Wilson, (1990). Social Factors and Suicide in *Sub-Saharan Africa. African Journal of Psychiatry,* 2 no 4 (1990): 56.

[42] Lister and Wilson, *Social Factors and Suicide in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 57.

[43] J. Okwu, The Unity of Being: An African Philosophical Interpretation. *African Studies Review*, 22 no 3(1979): 33.

[44] G. Bantwana and D. Zanré, African communal values and beliefs: A scholarly exploration. *Journal of African Studies*, 3 no 6 (2019): 33.

[45] Mbiti, African *Religions and Philosophy*, 125

abandonment of one's duty to the ancestors, the community, and future generations.[46] As suicide was viewed as a direct contradiction to the principles of Ubuntu, it carried significant social stigma and was strongly discouraged within Bantu cultures. The Bantu communities' approach to mental health challenges is rooted in a sense of shared responsibility and collective support. The interconnected nature of individuals within these societies meant that mental health struggles were not seen as an isolated issue but rather as a concern for the entire community. This perspective encouraged vigilance and mutual care, fostering an environment where those facing emotional distress could seek understanding and assistance.

The communal way of life in Bantu cultures provided a strong foundation for addressing mental health concerns, particularly the sensitive issue of suicide. Deeply embedded cultural practices shaped the way communities responded to emotional difficulties, reinforcing a collective approach to supporting those in need. Communal gatherings during significant life events played a crucial role in suicide prevention. These gatherings created essential support networks where individuals struggling with emotional turmoil could find comfort, empathy, and a sense of belonging, which was vital for mental well-being. In times of crisis, such gatherings served as safe spaces for people to share their burdens, openly discuss challenges, and find reassurance in the collective support of the community. Additionally, communal dynamics contributed to suicide prevention by promoting open conversations and raising awareness about mental health. By sharing experiences, concerns, and achievements, the community developed a collective consciousness about the importance of mental well-being. This awareness helped break down the stigma surrounding mental health, facilitating the dissemination of information, resources, and support systems. These communal gatherings whether for celebrations, mourning, or crises, became cultural spaces where mental health was openly addressed rather than hidden. This openness played a vital role in preventing suicide by encouraging early recognition and intervention for mental health struggles.

In conclusion, the strong communal ethos of Bantu radical communitarianism, deeply rooted in cultural traditions, was central to their approach to mental health and suicide prevention. Communal gatherings fostered support networks, reduced stigma, and encouraged open dialogue, creating an environment where individuals facing emotional distress could receive the help they needed. This cultural model emphasized the interconnectedness of Bantu societies and offered a framework for suicide prevention strategies that prioritize cultural sensitivity and collective well-being.

1.6. Ancestral Beliefs and Suicide Prevention

Analyzing suicide prevention within traditional Ubuntu radical communitarianism reveals a complex approach grounded in ancestral beliefs, social structures, and communal support systems. Among the traditional Bantu people, a strong connection with their ancestors significantly shaped their perspectives on life and death. Rather than being distant figures, ancestral spirits were perceived as active and engaged entities who maintained an ongoing presence in the lives of their descendants.[47] This belief, central to Bantu spirituality, reinforced the idea that ancestors continued to provide guidance and influence the well-being of the living.

The concept of ancestral guardianship played a vital role in preventing suicide within the Bantu community. Suicide was regarded as a violation of the sacred bond with one's ancestors and a rejection of their protection and wisdom.[48] Taking one's own life was believed to disrupt the

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[46] Okwu, *The Unity of Being*, 43.

[47] Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 45.

[48] Mbiti, African *Religions and Philosophy*, 125.

balance between the living and the spiritual world, potentially provoking ancestral displeasure. According to Bantu cultural traditions, such a disruption could bring misfortune, illness, or other hardships upon both the individual and the wider community. The fear of these consequences served as a strong cultural deterrent against suicide, shaping individual choices within the Bantu worldview. Furthermore, suicide carried a strong social stigma within the Bantu community and was considered a direct violation of Ubuntu values and ancestral traditions that prioritized collective well-being. Families and communities affected by suicide often faced blame and shame, as they were perceived to have failed in their responsibility to support and protect the individual.[49] This societal condemnation served as an additional deterrent, discouraging individuals from contemplating suicide due to the potential damage it could inflict on their reputation and their family's standing within the community.

The fear of provoking ancestral anger underscored the cultural emphasis on valuing and safeguarding life. This fear extended beyond personal consequences and encompassed the potential harm to the entire community.[50] Ancestral disapproval, believed to bring misfortune or calamities upon the community, functioned as a powerful collective deterrent, reinforcing the shared duty of ensuring the well-being of each individual.[51]

1.7. Taboos and Suicide Prevention

In traditional Ubuntu's radical communitarianism, taboos played a crucial role in suicide prevention by establishing moral and social boundaries that discouraged self-harm. Deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual beliefs, these taboos functioned as protective measures against behaviors that could harm both the individual and the community.

Bantu societies upheld communal values through mechanisms that discouraged destructive actions on both individual and collective levels.[52] Suicide was often perceived as a disruption of the spiritual order, with many Bantu communities believing it disturbed the balance between the living and their ancestors, potentially resulting in spiritual disfavor or curses. The fear of spiritual exclusion such as being denied proper burial rites or ancestral acceptance, served as a significant deterrent. These taboos reinforced social accountability, as those who considered suicide faced the prospect of being dishonorably remembered, while their families endured the stigma associated with the act.

Communities responded to suicides with strict sanctions and rituals, emphasizing the gravity of such actions. For instance, the Chewa sometimes buried those who died by suicide outside communal burial grounds or in ways that marked their deaths as unnatural.[53] These practices were not merely punitive but were intended to reinforce the taboo and dissuade others from taking similar actions. Ultimately, taboos underscored the significance of communal life, reinforcing the idea that individuals were intrinsically connected to both their community and their ancestors. By framing suicide as an act that severed these ties, taboos encouraged individuals to seek support from their community rather than resorting to self-harm. This was further reinforced by communal vigilance—when someone exhibited signs of emotional distress or suicidal tendencies, the

[49] Makgoba, *African Beliefs on Death*, 148.

[50] Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, 113.

[51] Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, 113.

[52] Lister and Wilson, *Social Factors and Suicide in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 67.

[53] Van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion,* 37.

community often intervened proactively. These interventions stemmed from the belief that suicide not only affected the individual but also threatened the harmony of the entire community.

2.1. Critique of Ubuntu's Radical Communitarianism

Reflecting on Ubuntu's radical communitarianism within traditional Bantu societies during the pre-colonial era reveals its profound influence on addressing mental health challenges and reducing suicide rates. Ubuntu values, rooted in communal living and interconnectedness, emphasized the relationship between personal well-being and the community's welfare. By fostering strong social bonds and collective support, these societies created an environment conducive to positive mental health. Unlike individualistic frameworks, Ubuntu prioritized relationships and communal harmony, forming a supportive social structure that significantly enhanced emotional well-being.

In this regard, Kaunda asserts that traditional African communalism operated as a mutual society that prioritized the basic needs of all members, discouraging individualism and elevating communal welfare as the "supreme criterion of behavior."[54] This perspective is well captured in the Chewa proverb '*Kali konkha ndikanyama, ali awiri ndi anthu*', meaning, 'That which is alone is a beast, but those that are two are human.' In other words, to be human is to be in numbers. According to the Chewa, to be human is intrinsically tied to community, suggesting that isolation diminishes one's humanity, as humans are inherently social beings. In such societies, individualism characterized by the pursuit of personal goals and gains, was considered foreign, as community welfare took precedence.

In traditional Ubuntu's radical communitarianism, the community good was valued above individual interests. Ubuntu's focus on relationships and harmony highlighted the interconnected nature of individual and community well-being. This philosophy underscored the importance of strong social bonds and communal support networks in fostering positive mental health. Ubuntu-driven communities provided a sense of belonging, which acted as a buffer against stress and isolation. Through regular social interactions and shared experiences, they effectively addressed loneliness and promoted psychological well-being.

Ubuntu also cultivated collective efficacy, encouraging individuals to work together towards common goals. Shared cultural values reduced the impact of stressors on mental health, while opportunities for personal contribution enhanced individuals' sense of purpose, self-esteem, and overall well-being. Furthermore, Ubuntu helped reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues. Its core principles of interconnectedness, shared humanity, and collective responsibility fostered empathy, acceptance, and open dialogue. This approach normalized conversations about mental health and made it easier for individuals to share their experiences, challenging the divisive "us versus them" mindset often associated with mental health stigma.

In Ubuntu-driven communities, mental health was viewed as a shared responsibility rather than an individual burden. By nurturing mentally healthy environments and combating stigma, these communities empowered members to support one another in times of need. While traditional Bantu communities lacked modern psychiatrists, they relied on wise elders for guidance on moral and psychological well-being.[55] This reliance on communitarianism, even at the expense of individual autonomy, was really instrumental in addressing issues like suicide. This extreme or radical communitarianism should be given a credit for addressing such issues in the traditional Bantu societies. However, once everything is said and done, the argument is that applying such

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[54] J.W.M. Van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion* (Balaka: Montfort Media, 2001), 33.

[55] Odera Oruka, *Practical Philosophy, In search of an Ethical Minimum* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1997), 262.

Ubuntu's radical communitarianism to modern society poses challenges. The point is that the form of communitarianism practiced in traditional Bantu communities may no longer be appealing in contemporary African societies. Modern challenges necessitate a more balanced approach to communitarianism, one that addresses both community and individual needs in tackling mental health issues. Traditional Ubuntu's radical communitarianism's emphasis on the community often overshadowed the individual, as Mbiti elucidates:

> In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual, for the individual depends on the corporate group…. whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happen to the whole group, happens to the individual. The individual can only say, 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.[56]

Menkiti supports the notion that, in the African context, the communal world holds primacy over individual life histories, both ontologically and in terms of epistemic accessibility.[57] This perspective views the community as central, with individual members being secondary. Rights and freedoms are not seen as intrinsic to individuals but as derived from the community, which determines the scope of their pursuit of personal goals. This viewpoint, often labeled as Ubuntu's radical or extreme communitarianism, raises significant concerns. Gyekye criticizes Ubuntu's extreme or radical communitarianism. He argues that:

> The extreme or unrestricted communitarianism fails to give adequate recognition to the creativity, inventiveness, imagination and idealistic proclivities of some human individuals in matters relating to the production of ideas and the experience of visions. The powers of inventiveness, imagination and so on are not entirely a function of the communal structure; they are instead a function of natural talents or endowments, even though they can only be nurtured and exercised in a cultural community.[58]

The proponents of Ubuntu's radical communitarianism prioritize the community's interests over individual rights, prompting questions about whether individuals can develop independently within such a system. Can a person act autonomously without being constrained by family and lineage obligations? Doesn't this kind of communal focus undermine individual human rights?

A significant issue with Ubuntu's radical or extreme communitarianism lies in its conception of personhood. In this framework, a person's identity is entirely communal; an individual becomes a "person" only through the community's recognition. Without this recognition, the individual is regarded as a non-entity. Personhood is thus socially sanctioned and tied to fulfilling communal obligations, demonstrating loyalty, and prioritizing the community's needs over personal desires. Moreover, individuals who fail to conform to communal norms, display immoral tendencies, or deviate from the community's expectations are often viewed as less human or even non-persons.

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[56] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108.

[57] I. A. Menkiti, *Person and community in African Traditional Thought. Africa Philosophy: An Introduction* (University Press of America, 1984), 171.

[58] Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 59.

This perspective creates tension between communal expectations and the recognition of individuality, self-expression, and identities outside the community's standards. The insistence on communal norms - such as marriage, bearing children, and contributions to family and community - often marginalizes those who seek to assert their autonomy or who do not align with these expectations, for example, those who cannot give birth. The concept of personhood tied to communal standing creates a conflict between the duty to the community and the individual's right to self-determination, freedom, and personal identity.

Another challenge with Ubuntu's radical communitarianism lies in its reverence for elders in traditional communities. This reverence often leads to epistemological and political authoritarianism. In traditional Bantu societies, elders are viewed as the sole bearers of knowledge and wisdom.[59] This is reflected in the Chewa saying *Akulu akulu ndi mdambo modzimira moto*, meaning, "Elders are the swamp that extinguishes fire." By this logic, anyone younger is presumed to lack wisdom and is expected to accept the elders' pronouncements without question. Wiredu criticizes this, noting that radical communitarianism often upholds the principle of unquestioning obedience to elders, discouraging curiosity and independent thought among the youth and adults alike.[60] This epistemological dominance of elders translates into political authoritarianism.[61] Elders, perceived as having exclusive access to knowledge, often impose their views on the younger members of the community, sometimes against their will. This "do-as-we-say" approach can stifle innovation, independence, and the active participation of younger generations, such as today's Generation Zeers, who may resist such authoritarian attitudes. Kaunda asserts:

> Social harmony was a vital necessity in (traditional Africa) where almost every activity was a matter of team work. Hence, chiefs and tribal elders had an important judicial and reconciliatory function. They adjudicated between conflicting parties, admonished the quarrelsome and antisocial and took whatever action was necessary to strengthen the social fabric.[62]

Kaunda, in his praise of traditional African communitarianism, inadvertently highlights its negative aspects. The measures elders sometimes employed to preserve and strengthen the social fabric were often drastic, severe, and inhumane. For example, individuals deemed quarrelsome or antisocial were occasionally targeted for elimination under the guise of communal harmony.[63] Among the Chewa, this sometimes involved organizing hunts specifically aimed at eliminating such individuals.[64] Uruka buttresses this view as he notes that punishment methods in traditional Africa were often ruthless. This mindset persists in modern Africa, as evidenced by the prevalence of "instant justice," such as the lynching of suspected robbers in marketplaces.[65] p'Bitek argues

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[59] Didier Njirayakumanda Kaphagawani, On African Communalism: Philosophical Perspective, *in Philosophical Focus on Culture and Traditional Thought Systems in Development*, J.M. Nyasani, ed., (Nairobi: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 1988), 291.

[60] K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and African Culture* (Cambridge: University Press, 1980), 4.

[61] Njirayakumanda Kaphagawani, *On African Communalism,* 290.

[62] Kaunda, *A Humanist in Africa*, 24.

[63] Kaphagawani, *On African Communalism*, 220.

[64] Cf John W. Gwengwe, *Sikusinja ndi* Gwenembe (Blantyre: Malawi Publications and Literature Bureau, 1975), 99.

[65] Odera Uruka, African Philosophy; A Brief Personal History and Current Debate. In *Contemporary Philosophy, vol V: African Philosophy,* ed. G. Floistand, (The Hague: Martinus Niehoff, 1987): 54.

that many of Africa's social ills, including authoritarianism, are deeply rooted in indigenous practices and the social structure itself.[66]

Traditional African communitarianism also fostered epistemological authoritarianism. Among the Chewa, for instance, young people questioning instructions from elders were viewed as disrespectful and deserving of punishment. The cultural expectation was blind obedience to elders' requests, as encapsulated in the Chewa proverb *kukana nsalu ya akulu ndikuivika,* meaning "to refuse to wash the elder's linen is merely to soak it." Thus, one is not expected to give an explicit 'No' to a request made by an elder. Rather, one shows one's disapproval by doing half the job or less-than-perfect job.[67]

Another contradiction within Ubuntu's radical communitarianism lies in certain Bantu cultural practices that persist despite being outdated in modern contexts. Witchcraft remains prevalent in some communities, while envy and the prioritization of social over individual achievement stifle personal ambition. In many Bantu societies, individuals striving for excellence beyond communal expectations are often regarded as outsiders. These negative behaviors, rooted in envy and superstition, undermine the very Ubuntu philosophy that seeks to uphold communal well-being.

Male suicides in modern Bantu societies are another concerning issue linked to the persistence of Ubuntu's radical communitarianism. According to the World Health Organization, men have a higher suicide rate (12.6 per 100,000) compared to women (5.4 per 100,000).[68] This phenomenon highlights the contradictions within Ubuntu values, which emphasize communal recognition of personhood but can also impose unrealistic societal expectations. Shame associated with failing to meet financial and masculine ideals often drives men to despair. Cultural sayings that emphasize stoicism, such as *Mwamuna salira* ("a man does not cry"), *Mwamuna saopa kufa* ("a man does not fear death"), and *Mwamuna ndiye wodya zowawa* ("a real man takes bitter herbs"), reinforce these pressures. These expectations demand mental fortitude and physical strength while discouraging men from expressing emotions such as fear, anxiety, pain, or sadness. Such prohibitions on emotional vulnerability create a culture where men feel isolated, making it difficult for them to seek help or address their struggles openly.[69] This cultural contradiction undermines the communal support systems Ubuntu aims to provide, particularly for men facing emotional or mental health challenges.

Social expectations in traditional Ubuntu's radical communitarianism strongly uphold masculine ideals such as sexual potency, procreation, and the ability to provide economically and materially for one's family otherwise one is regarded a non-entity. Achieving these standards is regarded as the foundation of a successful male identity. Conversely, men in reversed roles, especially where women act as breadwinners, are stigmatized and labeled with derogatory terms such as *mamuna opepera* (useless man). Similarly, virility and sexual prowess are considered vital markers of masculinity, with the ultimate validation being fathering biological children. Men who are impotent or childless are often ridiculed and given derogatory names like *Gojo* or *Chumba* (one

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[66] O. p'Bitek, *Indigenous Ills in Socialism in Tanzania*, vol 2, L Cliffe and J. Saul (eds) (Dar-es Salaam: EAPH, 1973): 293.

[67] Kaphagawani, *On African Communalism*, 290.

[68] World Health Organization, *Suicide in Africa, a neglected reality, Analytical Fact Sheet*, 2022. Accessed on 15/01.2025.https://files.aho.afro.who.int/afahobckpcontainer/production/Suicide_Regional_Fact_sheet_August2022.pdf

[69] M. Adinkrah, Better dead than dishonored: Masculinity and male suicidal behaviour in contemporary Ghana *in Social sciences Med,* 74, no 2 (2012): 474.

who is impotent) or referred to mockingly with phrases such as *Anagwa mumtengo wa papaya* (the one who fell from a pawpaw tree). Among the Sena and Lomwe people of Malawi and Mozambique, traditional practices attempt to address infertility but often perpetuate outdated norms. For example, in cases where a couple struggles to conceive, a man known as a *fisi* (a hyena) may be formally arranged to impregnate the woman, a practice called *kusasa fumbi* (removing the dust). Other customs, such as *Chidyerano* (spouse-swapping as a symbol of communal unity) and *kulowa chokolo* (levirate marriage, where a widow is inherited by her late husband's brother), persist in some Bantu areas. While these practices aim to reinforce communal bonds, they are often carried out without considering the health risks, such as the potential transmission of HIV/AIDS, making them increasingly irresponsible in modern contexts.

Failure to fulfill these socially enforced roles and identities can lead to low self-esteem, a sense of personal failure, and feelings of entrapment.[70] Men who fail to meet these expectations often experience shame, a loss of social status, and a profound sense of defectiveness and helplessness, which can contribute to suicidal behavior.[71] This highlights a fundamental contradiction within the communitarian conception of personhood; rather than rejecting social responsibility, individuals' actions are often driven by sense of obligation to meet community-defined norms, particularly those related to gender. Consequently, the failure of individuals to align with these expectations reflects, in part, the community's values, practices, and rituals.

Women also face significant challenges under the patriarchal structures of traditional Ubuntu's radical communitarianism. In such male-dominated societies, decision-making within families and communities was often monopolized by men, leaving women with little voice in important matters. Leadership roles were typically denied to women, and their societal contributions were confined to domestic responsibilities, such as child-rearing, cooking, and maintaining the household.[72] In some Bantu communities, wife-beating was considered a husband's right, stemming from a patriarchal system where men held dictatorial control over women.[73]

Given these historical practices, a critical question arises: can the Ubuntu's radical communitarianism of traditional Bantu societies be relevant in addressing modern challenges, such as mitigating suicides? The realities of contemporary Bantu societies, characterized by urbanization, religious and ethnic diversity, and class differences, suggest that radical communitarianism, as practiced in the past, may no longer be suitable. A more nuanced approach that balances communal values with individual autonomy and rights is needed to address the complexities of modern Bantu societies as far as mental health and suicide problems are concerned.

Conclusion

The paper has argued that Ubuntu's radical or extreme communitarianism played a pivotal role in addressing and mitigating suicide phenomena in traditional Bantu societies during the pre-colonial era. Rooted in deeply intertwined social, cultural, and spiritual frameworks, Ubuntu's radical communitarianism fostered a sense of collective identity, mutual accountability, and interconnectedness. These elements ensured that individuals felt valued and supported within the

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[70] J. Osafo, Suicide among men in Ghana: the burden of masculinity. *Death studies*, 42, no 10, (2018): 658.

[71] Osafo, *Suicide among men in Ghana*, 653.

[72] Ignatius Onwuatugure, Gender Issues with Contemporary African Culture, in *International Journal of Modern Science and Research Technology*, 1 no. 6 (2013): 18.

[73] Chris Abakare and Vincent Okeke, Communalism in Contemporary African Society: A Phenomenological Study in *Nnandi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy*, 10 no. 10 (2018): 79.

community, significantly reducing alienation and the existential crises that often precipitate suicidal behaviors. The communal approach emphasized restorative interventions rather than punitive measures, leveraging the collective resources of the community to address individual crises and uphold social harmony. However, as modernization and globalization transform African societies, the relevance and applicability of radical communitarianism in its traditional form are increasingly challenged. The erosion of close-knit communal structures, coupled with the rise of individualism and urbanization, has led to a fragmentation of social bonds. Traditional mechanisms of collective support and conflict resolution have weakened, creating a need for a reimagined form of Ubuntu's communitarianism.

In contemporary African societies, a more dynamic and inclusive communitarian framework is necessary; one that balances the values of collective responsibility with respect for individual agency. This communitarianism should integrate traditional values with contemporary realities, incorporating elements such as mental health awareness, access to professional psychological services, and policy-driven social welfare programs. By doing so, modern African societies can build systems that not only address the root causes of suicide but also resonate with the complex realities of a globalized and interconnected world.