

Masivuse umsamo – Let us rebuild the altar: Recreating the home as the centre of worship and a communal redefinition of family values



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The erosion of the term 'Father' from societal vocabulary reflects a deeper social and spiritual crisis in African communities. This article examines how Christianity and colonialism disrupted African family structures and aims to propose pathways for their theological and cultural reconstruction. Using the See–Judge–Act methodology, this conceptual–theological study engages historical, cultural and theological analysis to trace how Christianity and colonialism redefined the African understanding of family, fatherhood and communal responsibility. It draws on isiZulu cosmology, the notion of *umsamo* [the family altar], and the ubuntu ethic of interdependence. The study finds that colonialism – through urbanisation, migrant labour and forced removals – and certain Western forms of Christianity displaced the home as the centre of worship, eroding the familial priesthood and the communal cohesion that once anchored African societies. Yet overlaps between African spirituality and Christianity offer possibilities for renewal, particularly through mentorship, collective fatherhood and shared moral formation.

Contribution: This study contributes to African theological discourse by firstly redefining 'family' as a community of shared responsibility rather than a nuclear unit. Secondly, proposing the re-centring of the home as a sacred site of worship and formation. Thirdly, advocating a theology of fatherhood grounded in ubuntu and communal ethics. It concludes that rebuilding the *umsamo* – literally and symbolically – can restore moral and spiritual wholeness in postcolonial African societies.

Keywords: *umsamo*; ubuntu; fatherhood; colonialism; African spirituality; family values; theology of the home.

Introduction

First of all, an explanation of the article's title. *Umsamo* in Zulu culture is traditionally a sacred space within a home, used to connect with ancestors and the spiritual realm. It symbolises the spiritual heart of the household, emphasising family unity, respect and continuity. The 'altar' metaphor reflects a call to restore homes as places of spiritual grounding and moral guidance. The communal redefinition of family values involves integrating traditional practices with modern challenges such as urbanisation, technology and globalisation.

We begin with a story (as a parable) told by Father MacRae (2020).

Years ago, officials at South Africa's Kruger National Park faced the challenge of managing an overpopulation of African elephants. To reduce numbers, they relocated juvenile male and female elephants to Pilanesburg National Park. However, the larger, dominant bull elephants could not be transported due to limitations in the airlift harness. While the initial plan seemed successful, an unexpected crisis emerged at Pilanesburg: juvenile male elephants began violently killing endangered white rhinoceroses and exhibiting unusually aggressive behaviour.

Rangers investigated and discovered that, in the absence of the dominant bull elephants, the juveniles lacked role models to manage their natural 'musth' – a testosterone-driven frenzy during mating season. Without the guidance and authority of older bulls to curb their aggression, the young elephants turned unruly. To resolve the issue, older bulls from Kruger were eventually relocated to Pilanesburg. Their presence immediately restored order, as the juveniles adopted the behaviours of their elders, learning how to behave like proper elephants.

This remarkable story underscores the importance of mentorship and role models in maintaining social harmony, whether in the animal kingdom or human communities. It serves as a powerful metaphor for the role of elders in guiding and shaping younger generations.

Family, as a foundational unit of society, serves as a critical site for nurturing values, shaping identities and fostering communal cohesion (Udoh 2014). In the South African context, family structures have been profoundly shaped by historical, cultural and religious influences, making them a rich subject for theological and ethical reflection. This article emerges from the theme of a conference, titled 'We Are Family: Theological and Ethical Reflections on Family in South Africa', and aims to critically engage the evolving understanding of family, fatherhood and communal values within this context. Rooted in cultural and religious perspectives, it seeks to balance the reclaiming of traditional values within the pursuit of inclusive, equitable and transformative family systems.

A key tension within this exploration is the critique of patriarchy alongside the acknowledgement of the traditional frameworks that have historically underpinned African family systems (Mudau & Obadire 2017:67). This article recognises that while communal values offer profound lessons, they are not without their challenges, particularly in relation to gender equity and power dynamics. The reflection is undertaken with humility and full awareness of the author's positional biases as a participant within these traditions. The hope is that this exploration will not be a nostalgic glorification of the past but a critical engagement with issues that continue to impact the lives of many Africans today.

While existing literature provides valuable sociological insight, much of it has spoken about Africans rather than by Africans, leaving a gap in contextual theological analysis. This article adopts a contextual and experiential approach, drawing on isiZulu influences and broader African philosophies such as ubuntu to reimagine family structures and values. Ubuntu, with its emphasis on interdependence, mutual care and shared responsibility, provides a compelling ethical framework for envisioning inclusive and cohesive families in contemporary South Africa (Cattell 1997:37–39).

The theological dimensions of this discussion are equally significant. The concept of God as Father or Mother, for example, challenges us to reflect on the ideal qualities of parenthood – nurturance, guidance and care – while resisting the temptation to project human failings onto the divine. Similarly, the biblical emphasis on communal living and the priesthood of believers invites us to re-centre worship within the home, fostering spiritual leadership and moral grounding within families.

Ethical considerations further deepen this reflection, particularly in addressing the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, which disrupted traditional African family structures through forced removals, migrant labour and

urbanisation (Smit 2001). These historical forces not only fragmented families but also redefined gender roles and expectations, leaving many young men and boys without role models or clear guidance. This article explores the importance of mentorship and intergenerational modelling in restoring order and cohesion within families.

Building on Barker and Ricardo's (2005) assertion that masculinities are socially constructed, fluid and plural, this article acknowledges the diversity of African masculinities and the evolving nature of manhood in a pluralistic society. While traditional African family systems relied on patriarchal cohesion, we advocate for alternative frameworks that honour communal values while promoting gender equity and inclusivity. In this reimagining, family is understood not merely as a biological unit but as a community of shared responsibilities, encompassing descendants of common ancestors as well as those integrated through social bonds.

The central research gap addressed in this study is the lack of African-authored theological perspectives that articulate how family, faith and fatherhood intersect within postcolonial realities.

Accordingly, the study aims to:

- Examine the cultural and theological disruptions of African family life caused by colonialism and missionary Christianity.
- Explore how traditional practices and values such as ubuntu and *umsamo* can inform a renewed theological understanding of family.
- Propose constructive pathways for redefining fatherhood and communal identity in South Africa today.

Ultimately, this article seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation about family in South Africa by offering theological and ethical insights that are both culturally rooted and forward-looking. By addressing the intersections of tradition, modernity, faith and justice, it aims to inspire a redefinition of family that is relevant, transformative and aligned with the values of ubuntu and mutual care.

The foundations of family

The concept of family in African society extends beyond the nuclear arrangement of parents and children. It encompasses a communal approach where the upbringing and nurturing of individuals are a collective effort. As expressed in the isiZulu saying, 'it takes a village to raise a child', the African worldview prioritises community over individualism. This communal engineering allows every elder to act as a parental figure, fostering a collective responsibility for the moral and social development of the youth (Mchunu 2007:225–227). This traditional structure imbued families with resilience, stability and a strong moral compass. Mkhize (2006) refers to this concept as collective fathering and laments the decline caused by colonialism and apartheid, and how these evil phenomena continue to affect the lives of many black South Africans. It is on this basis that it is argued here that the

imposition of colonial and missionary ideologies disrupted the collective parenting practices and interconnectedness which were a gift of ubuntu.

Mission schools, for example, sought to replace communal African values with Western nuclear family ideals. As Uka (1991:180) highlights, these schools dismissed African cultural practices as primitive and pagan, leaving a generational void in cultural confidence. Consequently, many African families became alienated from their traditions, eroding the communal values that had long sustained them.

Traditional rites of passage – which played a pivotal role in transitioning boys to men – have also diminished in their influence. These rites, such as male circumcision and initiation practices, once instilled critical societal values, including respect, responsibility and cultural identity. Barker and Ricardo (2005:9) emphasise that these practices provided young men with guidance during the often-confusing transition from adolescence to adulthood, creating a sense of cultural cohesion. The decline of such traditions has left many young men without structured mentorship, exacerbating social fragmentation.

Historical disruptions: Colonialism, apartheid and their legacy

When colonialism enticed people to a better life in the newly established towns, people (mainly men) left their homesteads in search of a dream, while others who were affected by forced removals also lost land and space that held their lives and livelihoods. Land remains important not only because of productivity but also because it enables men to provide for their families. All these connections to land were taken away, robbing men of their culturally held identity.

The move to the city became a new ‘rite of passage’ that meant once a man was old enough, he should leave his home and find employment where he could so that he could begin to provide for the rest of the family (as he also seeks to amass enough money to prepare lobola to start his own family) (Murray 1980:140–145). Depending on the wealth and power of the rural family elders and the strictness of those ties, it was common for the young men in the city to work, and what they earned was ‘banked’ with their family elders as a way of amassing the lobola money (Posel & Rudwick 2014). The wages from those labours were hardly ever enough to provide for themselves, let alone their families.

The breakdown of normal family structures due to colonial removals and forced migrant labour meant that these young men, like the elephants of the Pilanesberg, had to create new, different family structures, calling into question the normative family structures and the systems in which these operated.

Colonialism and apartheid left an indelible mark on African families, fundamentally altering their structure and function. The forced removals of communities from their ancestral lands disrupted their self-sufficient agrarian economies.

Land was not merely a resource for sustenance; it was the bedrock of identity, heritage and spiritual connection. The displacement of families into urban environments to serve as cheap labour further eroded traditional roles. As men left their homes to work in cities, their identities as providers and protectors were undermined.

Guy (1979), in *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom*, argues that the self-sufficiency of African homesteads posed a threat to colonial economic interests. This led to deliberate strategies to dismantle these structures, including the introduction of migrant labour systems. Young men were enticed to urban centres, where they lived in hostels or barracks, severed from their families. The removal to the city meant that young men often established relationships in the cities, which would ultimately lead to ‘vat’n’sit’ (cohabitation) situations and the formation of new families. Such settings often led to the formation of dual families – one in the city and one in rural areas – creating tensions over inheritance and familial loyalty (Zulu n.d.).

The implications of migrant labour extend beyond economic hardship. As Barker and Ricardo (2005:12) note, migration became a new rite of passage for young men, often leading to a power shift within families. Wage-earning young men began to usurp the authority of rural elders, causing intergenerational conflicts. Furthermore, unemployment and economic disenfranchisement emasculated many men, leading to strained relationships and the breakdown of traditional family structures.

Malinga and Ratele (2022) note the impact of colonialism and apartheid in their engagement with the effects of these systems on fatherhood:

For unemployed men who desire to be recognised as fathers to their children, their non-recognition means not only their own exclusion from certain rights and decision-making powers, but also cultural isolation from their children – a phenomenon experienced disproportionately by Black men in South Africa whose lives remain affected by the country’s violent and oppressive history. (p. 268)

Theological reflections: Family as a sacred institution

The shifting of a worship centre from the home and the designation of a stranger as a father left a vacuum for many African homes. Fathers were reduced to devotion leaders who also had to call the stranger ‘father’ in their stead.

In an African home, worship, while not formalised or time-structured, was integral to family life. All major family movements were governed by informing elders and ancestors about what was about to happen or what had occurred (Edwards et al. 2011:131). The sacred space for these rituals, called *umsamo*, was central to every homestead. This space, often in the hut declared *indlu yabadala* [the elders’ hut], was where family rituals were carried out. The patriarch of the family would address ancestors, offer prayers and libations,

and ensure family matters were presented to them, while the rest of the family listened silently. Through this inductive learning process, children were taught that ancestors were ever-present and had the power to influence life positively or negatively.

This ritual practice informed African understandings of sin, which emphasised acts that brought shame to the family name and structure. Western soteriological definitions of sin, centred on guilt, could be enriched by integrating the African perspective that includes communal shame.

The African family has long been considered sacred, intertwining spirituality with daily life (Laurenti 2014:25). Traditional African religions viewed the family as a microcosm of the divine order, where elders acted as custodians of wisdom and spiritual guidance. This role extended to fatherhood, encompassing safety, provision, heritage and priesthood. However, colonial and missionary influences sought to redefine these roles through the lens of Western Christianity.

Missionary teachings imposed an anglicised model of manhood that devalued African culture and traditions (Cleall 2009:232–235). Churches replaced traditional rites with Western ideals of masculinity, which clashed with indigenous values. This shift marginalised the role of fathers as spiritual leaders within their families, relegating them to mere economic providers.

The rise of men's guilds within churches, such as the Methodist Young Men's Guild, sought to bridge this gap by fostering moral and spiritual development among men. These groups adapted traditional regimental structures, imbuing them with Christian values. However, they often perpetuated patriarchal stereotypes, necessitating a reimagining of their role to promote inclusivity and communal service.

Masculinity in transition: Mentorship and role modelling

The transition of masculinity in African societies reflects the broader socio-economic and cultural upheavals of the past century. Traditional mentorship structures, where elders guided young men through rites of passage, have been undermined by urbanisation and globalisation. Langa's (2020) work on boys in Alexandra township underscores the need for intentional mentorship to address the challenges of modern masculinities.

The removal of men from their families, due to labour migration and colonial disruptions, severed young men from the sacred learning spaces of their homes. Many young men were placed in hostels and barracks, where *msamo* [competition] rituals could not be practised. This displacement undermined their connection to traditional practices and communal mentorship.

Even in four-roomed township houses, creating and maintaining sacred spaces presented challenges. Sacred worship, relegated to the main bedroom, was disrupted by logistical concerns, such as the issue of nudity in these spaces. These dislocations left young men without the rituals and role models that traditionally guided their development into manhood.

In traditional African societies, masculinity was closely tied to communal responsibilities and respect for elders. Initiation schools and other rites provided not only skills but also a moral framework for young men. However, as these practices declined, many young men turned to peer groups or insurgent organisations for guidance, frequently adopting violent behaviours as a means of asserting their identity (Barker & Ricardo 2005:10). This shift highlights the need for community-driven mentorship programmes that can restore positive role modelling.

Langa's (2020:23–26) research also reveals how gender-equitable versions of manhood are emerging in urban contexts. Exposure to diverse cultures and ideologies in cities allows young men to redefine masculinity in more inclusive and progressive ways. However, without proper guidance, this redefinition can lead to confusion and identity crises. Thus, intentional efforts to provide mentorship and create safe spaces for dialogue on masculinity are crucial.

Ethical reflections: Gender equity and inclusivity in family systems

Gender equity is essential for fostering harmonious family systems. Traditional African gender roles, while functional in agrarian contexts, frequently perpetuated patriarchal hierarchies that marginalised women. As Casimir, Chukwuelobe and Ugwu (2014:170) note, patriarchy begins with the preferential treatment of male children, reinforcing systemic inequality. These dynamics have long-lasting implications, including the undervaluation of women's contributions and the perpetuation of single-parent households.

The disruption of sacred spaces not only affected worship but also deprived younger generations of ethical training tied to these practices. Worship, central to African community life, served as a foundation for moral behaviour and communal accountability. As stated previously, African perspectives on sin, emphasising the shame one's actions bring to the community, could complement Western individualised guilt-based understandings. A hybrid ethical framework could offer a more holistic view of moral responsibility that addresses both individual guilt and communal shame.

To return to the elephant-parable: there is an interesting perspective that is offered by the elephant herds. It has been observed that elephant herds are mostly matriarchal in nature with specific roles performed by male elephants. When we take this into perspective then Diop (1989), a prominent African historian and scholar, offers a compelling

analysis of matriarchy as a defining characteristic of precolonial African societies. According to Diop, many African civilisations, particularly in regions south of the Sahara, operated on principles of matriarchy that emphasised communal governance, shared responsibilities and the central role of women in family and societal structures. This matriarchal framework was not a mirror image of patriarchal systems but a unique paradigm that prioritised inclusivity, harmony and collective well-being.

Diop challenges the conventional understanding of matriarchy as a system dominated by women, arguing instead that it represented a balance of power between genders. Women held significant influence as custodians of lineage, culture and spiritual practices, while men contributed to governance and protection (Diop 1989:153). In this model, family structures were grounded in reciprocity and interdependence, embodying the ubuntu philosophy of collective identity and shared responsibility.

In the context of contemporary South Africa, Diop's analysis provides a critical lens for interrogating the patriarchal frameworks that have come to dominate family systems due to colonial and religious influences. The disruption of traditional matriarchal values by colonialism introduced hierarchies that marginalised women and suppressed the communal ethos central to African societies.

Revisiting matriarchal principles offers an opportunity to foster gender equity within family systems by valuing the contributions of both men and women. It aligns with the broader aim of this article to redefine family structures in a manner that reflects shared leadership, mutual care and inclusivity. By drawing on the strengths of Africa's matriarchal heritage, families can address contemporary challenges while preserving the spirit of communal interdependence.

Reconstruction of family structures must prioritise gender inclusivity, ensuring that both men and women can thrive as equal partners. This includes redefining roles within the family, such as caregiving and economic provision, to align with contemporary realities. Churches and community organisations can play a pivotal role in promoting these values, fostering respect and cooperation within families.

In a multicultural and pluralistic society, family values must transcend cultural and religious boundaries. African families have long been characterised by their adaptability, integrating various influences while maintaining core principles of respect, responsibility and community. However, the imposition of Western values through colonialism and globalisation has often created tension between tradition and modernity. We must not forget the matriarchal nature of many African societies, where women play central roles in nurturing and sustaining families. Recognising and celebrating this heritage can provide a framework for inclusive family values that honour both tradition and progress.

Land remains a critical factor in family cohesion and identity. The dispossession of land during colonialism disrupted not

only economic stability but also spiritual and cultural practices. For many African families, land is a sacred space where ancestors are honoured, and communal ties are strengthened. Efforts to reclaim and restore these spaces must prioritise the needs of displaced communities, ensuring that they can rebuild their cultural and spiritual foundations.

Re-centring the home as a place of worship and communal growth

The home has always been a sacred space in African culture, serving as both a place of worship and a hub for communal growth. The rise of urbanisation and modernity has challenged this dynamic, relegating spiritual practices to formal institutions. However, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic underscored the importance of re-centring worship within the home. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted these inequities, particularly in how families adapted to worship and communal life. African traditional religion (ATR), which emphasises communal worship, was disrupted as gatherings moved to backyards or virtual spaces (Udok, Eton & Akpanika 2020). This shift necessitated a rethinking of how spiritual and cultural practices can be inclusive and adaptable to modern challenges.

Theological reflections must explore how homes can become spaces for nurturing faith, fostering dialogue and building community. This includes revisiting traditional practices that emphasise the sacredness of family and community bonds. The displacement of religious practices from the home to mission sites had disastrous ramifications for the religious grounding of African communities. Worship, integral to African life, was not just about devotion but also about the ethical and moral frameworks that guided communal life.

This displacement is reminiscent of the young elephants of Pilanesberg, who grew up without senior figures to provide guidance or mentorship. Similarly, young men, dislocated from their homes and stripped of traditional mentorship structures, faced a crisis of identity and moral direction, exacerbating the challenges of manhood in a postcolonial African context.

Reimagining family for the future: A call to action

The reconstruction of African family systems requires a holistic approach that integrates cultural heritage, theological insights and modern realities. This involves reclaiming traditional practices that promote communal responsibility while addressing the challenges posed by urbanisation, globalisation and economic inequality.

Key to this effort is the promotion of gender equity and the redefinition of roles within the family. Fathers must embrace their roles as protectors, providers and nurturers, while mothers' contributions must be valued and celebrated on an equal footing. Mentorship programmes, faith-based initiatives and community-driven projects can provide the support needed to achieve these goals.

Young African men are standing at a crossroad. On the one hand, the fragmentation caused by the colonial legacy can be perpetuated and the fragmentation of the African family unit, African values and familial roles will continue. If this path is chosen, the *generational curse* of surrendering to forces that erode the African identity will continue. The further generations hold on to this perspective, the more difficult it will be to revive the African spirit and place of the communal family model. On the other hand, young men can break the generational curse, facilitating a form of salvation that is not limited to the traditional missiological-Christian emphasis on personal redemption (Banda 2020), but the restoration of the sacred space of family within the African context. There is salvation in restoring the family unit within the context of traditional communities and communal values; this salvation is the saving of African masculinities, matriarchy, role-modelling, African values and traditions, and lastly, African spirituality.

The African family has the potential to serve as a model for inclusive and resilient social structures. It has a significant contribution to make! In a world marred by individualism, greed and fragmentation, by honouring its communal roots and adapting to contemporary challenges, the African communal family system can foster a sense of belonging, purpose and hope for future generations. As we reimagine family for the future, let us draw on the wisdom of our ancestors, the resilience of our communities and the transformative power of faith and collective action.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Sifiso Khuzwayo: Writing – original draft. Wessel Bentley: Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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