

Beyond the Scar: Selfishness as a Metaphysical Impediment to African Progress

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Abstract

Even though external forces like colonialism and slavery can be considered legitimate reasons for Africa's underdevelopment, pervasive selfishness, rather than external historical factors, stands as a formidable impediment to development efforts across African societies. This study, adopting a tripartite methodological procedure, which includes forty-five years of critical participant observation, a systematic empirical examination of the East African media, and theoretical synthesis, has analysed how selfishness (self-interest) is a metaphysical and structural impediment to African progress. African society, at all levels—from individual and household to national—is characterized by a pervasive "me-first" mentality, manifesting as a *sina uchungu* (I feel no pain) mentality, an inability to act through metaphysical evasiveness, which we refer to as the God-Satan mentality, the political economy of spiritual exploitation, lack of planning, irresponsibility, unaccountability, laziness, and a stifling of critical inquiry. The study reveals how this complex operates within the tension between traditional communitarian philosophies like Ubuntu and contemporary realities of cultural transformation, where historical legacies of extractive institutions intersect with modern religious interpretations to create environments where self-preservation behaviours become rationalized. By demonstrating how these internally rooted cultural and ethical dispositions actively undermine development efforts, the paper calls for a reconceptualization of African advancement that must address not only political-economic structures but also engage in deliberate projects of cultural, ethical, and spiritual renewal to foster the collective responsibility and human agency essential for sustainable progress.

Keywords: Selfishness; African Societies; Accountability; Fatalism; Social Capital; Collective Action

1. Introduction

The dialogue on African underdevelopment has long been dominated by the legacies of external forces: the historical injustices of slavery and the structural violence of colonialism (Rodney, 1972; Niyonzima, 2024). While acknowledging the undeniable and devastating impact of these factors, this paper posits that an exclusive focus on external causation risks overlooking a more insidious, internally rooted challenge. I argue that a pervasive culture of self-interest has much to do on African underdevelopment. Selfishness (Self-Interest) is defined as the acts prioritization of one's own personal needs, desires, and welfare, often at the cost of, or without due regard for, the well-being and interests of others or the collective gain (Bussen et al., 2024). African societies culture is characterized by the consistent prioritization of personal, familial, or ethnic gain over the communal good constitutes a profound metaphysical and structural impediment to progress in many African societies (Ayittey, 1998; Moyini, 2007).

This culture of selfishness (self-interest) transcends mere individual character flaws. It is a "lameness" that manifests at every level, from household dynamics to national governance, undermining cooperation, stifling innovation, and perpetuating a cycle of underachievement. The prevailing mentality, as observed in my own context, often appears overwhelmingly cantered on immediate personal benefit, systematically obstructing collective decision-making and sustainable progress (Zhang, 2023).

While self-interest is a component of universal human nature (Arevuo, 2023; Hobbes, 1651), its specific manifestation within the observed social contexts appears uniquely detrimental to communal well-being. This pushes beyond psychological egoism towards what can be termed detrimental hyper-individualism, where the pursuit of self-interest actively harms the collective effort in a society (Bussen et al., 2024; Tannock, 2021). This stands in stark contrast to the altruism and communal ethos espoused by traditional African philosophies like Ubuntu ("I am because we are") (Mbiti, 1969; Tutu, 1999). This paper will therefore explore the tension between these professed communal values and the observed reality, suggesting that contemporary African societies may be experiencing a complex cultural transformation. Influenced by globalization and urbanization (Wiredu, 1996; Gyekye, 1997), traditional communal bonds may be weakening without a corresponding adoption of robust ethics of civic responsibility, creating a vacuum where unchecked self-interest flourishes.

This inquiry has also engaged with the role of socio-economic structures and historical legacies. Colonialism, for instance, may not have directly caused this self-interest, but its policies of divide-and-rule and the imposition of extractive economic institutions likely eroded pre-existing communal trusts and incentivized self-preservation behaviors (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Rodney, 1972). Furthermore, contemporary issues like inequality and weak institutions create environments where prioritizing personal survival becomes a rational response (Sen, 1999; North, 1990).

Finally, the paper has analysed how certain interpretations of religion can foster a metaphysical evasion of responsibility. A literalist "GOD-SATAN" worldview, which attributes all outcomes to external, unquestionable entities, can absolve individuals of agency, nurturing a culture of

inaction and unaccountability that ultimately serves the self by removing the burden of responsibility (Sturdy, 2021; Gifford, 1998).

This paper is, therefore, a philosophical exploration of these interconnected themes, using lived experience as its foundational evidence to argue for a more nuanced understanding of the internal obstacles to African advancement.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design centered on a tripartite methodological framework: Observation, Empirical Review, and Theoretical Integration. This structured approach ensures that the research is grounded in lived experience, contextualized within public discourse, and rigorously analysed through established scholarly concepts. The interplay of these three methods facilitates a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the research problem.

2.1. Critical Participant Observation

The theoretical base of this study is Critical Participant Observation, observation that was carried out over a duration of forty five years in different Tanzanian and East African societies. The provided course of action is founded upon the ethnographic tradition that supposes deep immersion into the cultural setting so that the meanings and logic per the which social action occurs would be understood (Atkinson, 2017; DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). The most important dimension is the practice of reflexivity to which the practice surpasses description to challenge and analyse the forces field, social relations and historical contingencies in order to ascertain the observed phenomena (Madison, 2012).

Data Collection: Data were collected by being submerged and viewed in significant domains of social concern... This is equivalent to the principle of thick description, explained by Geertz (1973) that tries to document the multifaceted Ness and symbolism of the social actions in a relevant situation.

Analysis of data: The thematic coding procedure was repeated... It is through this that raw observation becomes conceptualized and this is the essence of the process of qualitative inquiry and ensures that the results are systematically acquired in line with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

2.2. Systematic Empirical Review

Such review of news media is a kind of document analysis where newspapers are viewed as the public records where the societal discourses and issues occur (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2008). This approach is intended to achieve triangulation, through another source of data to cross-check and contextualize results of the primary source of observation and boost the validity of the study (Denzin, 2017; Flick, 2018). Media frame analysis offers a clue of how social issues are being defined and perceived in the public (Entman, 1993). The data application of media is not new in qualitative research to investigate social phenomena in their manifestation in the public (Hansen and Machin, 2019).

2.3. Theoretical Integration

It presupposes the systematic literature review to map and synthesize the necessary scholarly work and provide its framework within the framework of the research (Jesson et al., 2011; Snyder, 2019). It is in the name of theoretical triangulation, where various perspectives are used to understand a complex set of data more holistically (Denzin, 2017; Patton, 2015). It is based on the principle of adductive analysis, according to which the researchers shift between empirical data and theory back and forth to come up with the most reasonable answer to the phenomenon at hand (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Having a logical analytical framework is a necessity to organize a qualitative inquiry and direct data interpretation (Ravitch and Riggan, 2016).

2.4. The Scope

This paper has noted the negative hyper-individualism in modern East Africa communities, whose main information source is the Tanzanian society with multiplication by Kenya and Uganda. The paper focused on the period after gaining independence, especially in 2000-2024, and it researched the inner cultural and metaphysical obstacles to the development of the African society. The research includes community relationships, institutional behavior, and religion in which self-interest was ardent in terms of failed collective action and mismanagement of the state resources. Based on the adaptations of participatory observation, media analysis, and theoretical integration, the study gave particular focus on urban and semi-urban views and eliminated any macroeconomic and general historical comparison to preserve the narrow scope of its analysis on the obstacle between collective progress and cultural barriers in specific geographical and time settings.

3. Theoretical Framework and Analytical Synthesis

In this section the author incorporates a number of theoretical perspectives that rely on moral philosophy and institutional economics, African communitarian philosophy, and sociological perspective of religion in a bid to develop a complicated structure of analysis. This combined conceptual prism allows the systematic explanations of the phenomena of harmful hyper-individualism, which is the process of metamorphosis of universal self-interest into culturally-specific forms which contribute to collective wellbeing destruction in modern African cultures, both structurally and metaphysically.

3.1. The Philosophical Terrain: From Universal Self-Interest to Detrimental Hyper-Individualism

Philosophy has long debated self-interest, from Hobbes' (1651) psychological egoism to Rand's (1964) ethical egoism. Our analysis distinguishes between universal self-interest, which can be channelled productively (Arevuo, 2023), and what we term detrimental hyper-individualism a form where the pursuit of self-gain actively and consistently undermines the collective foundations necessary for societal flourishing (Bussen et al., 2024). This is not merely the presence of self-interest but the absence or failure of the countervailing forces of altruism (Batson, 2011) and communal ethics.

3.2. African Philosophy and the Communal Ideal: The Promise and the Tension

The communitarian ethos of philosophies like Ubuntu (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 2002) provides a crucial normative benchmark. Ubuntu posits that an individual's humanity is realized through reciprocal relationships with others. However, scholars like Gyekye (1997) and Wiredu (1996) argue that traditional societies balanced communalism with a recognition of individual agency. The observed "hyper-individualism" thus represents not a return to a pre-colonial past but a modern pathology—a breakdown of this delicate balance under the pressures of contemporary political and economic life, creating what Appiah (1992) might describe as a state of moral confusion.

3.3. Political Economy and Institutional Analysis: The Structural Reinforcement

The work of Acemoglu & Robinson (2012) on extractive institutions and North (1990) on institutional path-dependency provides a structural lens. Colonialism created institutions that rewarded loyalty and rent-seeking over productivity and public service. This historical legacy, combined with contemporary weak governance and high inequality (Sen, 1999), creates a system where detrimental hyper-individualism is often a rational survival strategy, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle.

3.4. The Sociology of Religion: Fatalism and Evaded Agency

The paper draws on sociological studies of religion in Africa (Gifford, 1998; Bediako, 1995) that analyze how certain Pentecostal and charismatic theologies, with their strong emphasis on spiritual warfare and divine providence, can foster a culture of fatalism. This "metaphysical evasion" structurally mirrors the concept of the "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin, 1968), but in a cognitive realm: when everyone attributes failure to Satan, no one is responsible for fixing the fence

4. Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a tripartite analysis, weaving together the primary data from participant observation, a review of empirical cases from Tanzanian and East African media, and their integration with the established theoretical framework. This approach demonstrates that the observed patterns are not isolated but are reflected in public discourse and can be robustly explained through scholarly concepts.

4.1. The Metaphysics of Evaded Agency

The observation identified a prevalent tendency to attribute both success and failure primarily to divine will or demonic interference, a worldview that actively discourages critical inquiry and personal accountability. This was observed in instances where the clear, human causes of a failure, such as the collapse of a community project due to embezzlement, were reframed as a spiritual attack, thereby shifting focus away from those responsible. This pattern is not merely anecdotal but is reflected in the broader public discourse, as evidenced by empirical reviews of regional media. For example, a report in Tanzania's *The Citizen* detailed a failed municipal water project

where, despite an official investigation citing technical flaws and contractor negligence, local discourse predominantly attributed the failure to "evil spirits," demanding ritual cleansing over a technical audit (Mwangasa, 2023). A similar case was reported in Uganda, where farmers' associations blamed "curses" for poor harvests, diverting crucial attention from agricultural improvements (Kato, 2022). Theoretically, this phenomenon aligns with Gifford's (1998) analysis of how certain religious interpretations can foster a culture of passivity. It represents a "metaphysical evasion" of the human agency that is central to Sen's (1999) "capabilities" approach to development. The convergence of lived observation and documented news stories demonstrates how this worldview structurally absolves individuals and institutions from responsibility, creating a significant barrier to developmental problem-solving by undermining the very agency required for progress.

4.2. The Economics of Fragmentation: Failed Collective Action

The observed pattern of communal initiatives faltering where individuals prioritize immediate, personal gain over larger, shared future benefits finds consistent validation in regional economic reporting. This dynamic was evident in the failure of local projects, such as shared water sources or farmer cooperatives, where the temptation for short-term individual profit overrode long-term collective interest. Empirical analysis of regional business journalism substantiates this observation; for instance, *The EastAfrican* has documented how internal distrust and "side-selling" persistently cripple agricultural cooperatives across Kenya and Tanzania. A specific 2024 case study detailed the collapse of an Arusha dairy cooperative after most members breached their contract to sell milk secretly to a competing processor, thereby sacrificing stable, long-term pricing for immediate, albeit fleeting, personal gain (Muthoni, 2024). Theoretically, this scenario is a classic illustration of Olson's (1965) logic of collective action, wherein rational individual choices, such as becoming a free-rider or engaging in side-selling culminate in collective failure and economic loss for the entire group. Furthermore, these cases demonstrate a fundamental failure to establish the conditions Ostrom (1990) identified as essential for managing common-pool resources, notably the absence of robust, monitored agreements and deeply ingrained shared norms. The empirical evidence thus confirms that the observed behavior is not merely a social peculiar issue but a phenomenon with demonstrably negative and measurable economic consequences across East African society.

4.3. Institutional Distrust and the "Sina Uchungu" (I Feel No Pain) Mentality

The deeply ingrained attitude of "Sina Uchungu" ("I feel no pain"), observed as a deliberate emotional and ethical detachment from public assets, manifests in the reckless misuse of government property and a general tolerance for the decay of public infrastructure. This perception of the collective good as belonging to no one is starkly illustrated by media investigations. A 2023 piece in *Mwananchi* revealed that a majority of a regional administration's vehicles were inoperable due to rampant misuse for private business and a systemic neglect of maintenance, encapsulated by a local official's shrug: "It's a government car; when it breaks, the government will fix it" (Juma, 2023). A parallel sentiment was documented in Kenya, where residents of public housing estates expressed personal indifference to the upkeep of common areas, placing the entire burden of repair on a faceless "government" (Waweru, 2023).

Theoretically, this widespread detachment signals a catastrophic breakdown of the social contract and a profound deficit of social trust (Fukuyama, 2011). The "sina uchungu" mentality is more than a cultural trait; it is a rational, though ultimately destructive, adaptation to a system dominated by extractive institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012), where individuals have learned that their personal investment in the public good will neither be reciprocated nor valued, leading to a vicious cycle of neglect and institutional failure.

4.4. The Political Economy of Spiritual Exploitation

A symbiotic relationship has emerged between religious entrepreneurs and their congregations, forming a distinct political economy of spiritual exploitation. This dynamic is characterized by self-proclaimed prophets who market miraculous solutions for personal enrichment, while a segment of the populace, seeking wealth without work, willingly participates in this transactional faith. This observed phenomenon receives consistent documentation in East African media, where investigative reports detail the mechanics of these exploitative networks. A stark example was profiled in Kenya's *The Standard*, where a "prophet" sold "prayer oil" at exorbitant prices to impoverished followers, who in turn liquidated vital assets like livestock in the hope of divine financial intervention, bypassing practical income-generating activities (Njagi, 2024). Concurrently, Tanzanian media outlets like *Nipashe* have launched campaigns directly challenging the opulent lifestyles of pastors who minister to the poor (Saiboko, 2023). Theoretically, this ecosystem functions as a religious market (Gifford, 1998), where the "supply" of supernatural goods by hyper-individualistic religious leaders meets the "demand" from followers seeking unearned advantage a manifestation of what can be termed a "selfish laziness." This market relationship, as empirically verified, systematically corrodes the core principles of diligence and personal responsibility that underpin both traditional communal ethics and the modern capitalist ethos, thereby actively impeding socio-economic development.

5. The Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this inquiry substantiates that an internal culture of pervasive self-interest represents a formidable, yet critically under-theorized, impediment to African progress. Through a rigorous tripartite methodology integrating forty-five years of critical participant observation, systematic empirical review of East African media, and robust theoretical integration, the study reveals how this culture manifests as a socio-metaphysical barrier to development. The evidence demonstrates a consistent pattern of detrimental hyper-individualism that actively undermines collective action, erodes public trust through the "sina uchungu" (I feel no pain) mentality, and fosters metaphysical evasion of agency through worldviews attributing causality solely to external spiritual forces. This study confirms the historical backgrounds of the extractive institutions and current structural inequalities as vital background but the internal cultural and ethical dispositions have been the driving engine of immobility. The huge paradox between communitarianism ideologies of old philosophies like the Ubuntu and the present system of affairs which depict the scramble of selfishness is one of the reasons as to why such transformative strategies should be implemented. Consequently, sustainable progress necessitates a two-pronged approach to the

consideration of both the political-economic organization and the creation of a planned cultural, ethical, and spiritual renaissance founded on the rebirth of the collective responsibility and human agency.

A multi-level intervention must be put in place to overturn this popular culture and encourage the shared prosperity. They should add compulsory courses in critical thinking, civic ethics and financial literacy oriented in the reversal of the fatalistic way of thinking in the world and in educating in the real benefits of collective action and individual responsibility. Besides rhetorical communalism, development policy must promote organized collaborative economics by promoting transparent legal model forms of agricultural cooperatives and savings societies which display material advantages of cooperation. In order to raise the degree of the popular responsibility, one will have to introduce such signs of the localized governance as Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys that will enable to see the expenditures of corruption and interrupt the *sina uchungu* mentality. Simultaneously, interfaith discourses should re-read religious doctrine, emphasizing more on human agency and stewardship, and in reaction to passive fatalism and prosperity gospels. Finally, transformation of leadership through national programs that create and train ethical leaders in different areas is significant in re-branding leadership as service and not wealth amassment. These conjoint interventions are one method of offering the holistic manner of addressing the socio-metaphysical impediments to the African development that are entrenched.

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