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## **Communal Ethics and Moral Responsibility: a Philosophical Analysis of Bénézet Bujo's African Moral Framework**

Ética comunitaria y responsabilidad moral: un análisis filosófico del marco moral africano de Bénézet Bujo

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**Abstract:** African philosophy presents a relational moral vision in which communal participation, spiritual continuity, and intergenerational responsibility shape ethical thought and human identity. This paper examines these themes through the moral framework of Bénézet Bujo, whose synthesis of African communitarian metaphysics and Christian theological ethics offers a distinctive approach to moral responsibility. A critical reflection on African concepts of personhood, ancestral memory, and moral accountability highlights how Bujo's ethics is grounded in the ontology of life as communion. Employing philosophical analysis and hermeneutics, the paper argues that Bujo's model redefines moral responsibility as a communal, historically situated, and spiritually informed practice. The study concludes that Bujo's framework contributes meaningfully to global moral theory by offering a moral vision that is both contextually rooted and normatively rich.

**Keyword:** Communal ethics, African philosophy, Moral responsibility, Ubuntu philosophy, Intergenerational solidarity

**Resumen:** La filosofía africana presenta una visión moral relacional en la cual la participación comunitaria, la continuidad espiritual y la responsabilidad intergeneracional dan forma al pensamiento ético y a la identidad humana. Este artículo examina estos temas a través del marco moral de Bénézet Bujo, cuya síntesis de la metafísica comunitaria africana y la ética teológica cristiana ofrece un enfoque distintivo a la responsabilidad moral. Una reflexión crítica sobre los conceptos africanos de personalidad, memoria ancestral y responsabilidad moral resalta cómo la

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ética de Bujo se fundamenta en la ontología de la vida como comunión. Empleando análisis filosófico y hermenéutica, el artículo sostiene que el modelo de Bujo redefine la responsabilidad moral como una práctica comunitaria, históricamente situada y espiritualmente informada. El estudio concluye que el marco de Bujo contribuye significativamente a la teoría moral global al ofrecer una visión moral que es tanto contextualmente arraigada como normativamente rica.

**Palabras clave:** Ética comunitaria, Filosofía africana, Responsabilidad moral, Filosofía Ubuntu, Solidaridad intergeneracional

## Introduction

In contemporary African philosophical and theological scholarship, questions concerning the foundations of moral obligation have increasingly turned attention to the communal structures that define African life. Among the thinkers who have developed a distinctively African moral vision, Benezet Bujo stands out for his efforts to construct a theological ethics rooted in African categories of thought. His work emerges as a compelling synthesis of African communalism and Christian moral theology, wherein the notion of the person is never abstracted from the community but rather constituted through relationships with others, both living and ancestral.

The classical moral theories of the Western canon, deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics, tend to operate from a conception of the moral agent as an autonomous individual endowed with rational will. Even in more recent communitarian responses, the emphasis on social embeddedness often fails to account for the depth of relational ontology present in African thought. Bujo's intervention challenges these paradigms by insisting that in African contexts, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" is not merely a cultural saying, but a moral principle that shapes responsibility, justice, and human dignity.<sup>3</sup>

His ethics is shaped by what he calls *life as communion*, a moral and metaphysical principle that draws on Bantu philosophy and broader sub-Saharan traditions. Moral action, within this worldview, is not primarily the fulfilment of rules but the preservation and deepening of life within the community. A good act is one that strengthens the life-force of others; wrongdoing, in contrast, diminishes communal vitality.<sup>4</sup> This situates ethics not only within a horizontal social dynamic but also within a vertical axis that connects the living, the ancestors,

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<sup>3</sup> Benezet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

and the yet unborn. In Bujo's system, the moral self is one who assumes responsibility not merely for oneself, but for the community in its entirety.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the philosophical contours of Bujo's moral framework, focusing on how it redefines moral responsibility in light of communal ethics. The method employed is critical and comparative, bringing Bujo into dialogue with key African philosophers such as John Mbiti, Kwasi Wiredu, and Ifeanyi Menkiti, while also reflecting on points of tension and complementarity with Western moral traditions. The goal is to show that Bujo's moral philosophy is not only contextually grounded but also philosophically rich, offering insights for rethinking ethics in intercultural and pluralistic settings.

### **Bujo's Moral Philosophy in Context**

Bénézet Bujo's moral philosophy emerges at the intersection of African communitarian metaphysics and Christian theological ethics. His central argument is that African ethics cannot be reduced to an extension of Western moral theories nor dismissed as pre-philosophical intuition. Rather, it reflects a coherent and sophisticated system grounded in the ontology of communal life.<sup>5</sup> For Bujo, moral life is not an autonomous project of the self but a lived participation in the rhythm of community, the voice of the ancestors, and the unfolding of shared history.

Bujo's work responds to the moral fragmentation he perceives in both secular modernity and imported Christian moral frameworks. He argues that many of these systems presume a disembodied individual moral agent, often alien to African cultural settings where ethical life is deeply communal and spiritually integrated.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Bujo's *ethic of life as communion* builds on the Bantu philosophical understanding that life is meaningful only in relationship, and that the moral agent is one who enhances, rather than diminishes, the life-force of others.

A key concept in Bujo's work is what he calls *anamnestic solidarity*. Drawing from both African ancestral consciousness and the Christian notion of memory (*anamnesis*), Bujo proposes that ethical life involves remembering, honouring, and carrying forward the responsibilities of

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<sup>5</sup> Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

past generations.<sup>7</sup> This view expands moral responsibility beyond the present moment, making the self accountable not only to living members of the community but to ancestors and the yet unborn. Bujo writes that “the past is not past in African thought—it is a living force that instructs and obligates.”<sup>8</sup>

More recent scholarship has reinforced the significance of this perspective. In a 2022 edited volume, Bujo emphasises the need to develop a moral framework that is “differentiated” according to cultural contexts, rejecting universalist claims that marginalise African epistemologies.<sup>9</sup> His insistence on contextual ethics aligns with current global efforts to decolonise moral philosophy and to recognise the legitimacy of multiple ethical traditions.

African philosophers such as Metz and Ikuenobe have also extended Bujo’s framework. Metz’s 2025 analysis of self-directed duties draws on Bujo’s communitarian logic to argue that the self’s obligations to personal wellbeing cannot be disentangled from obligations to others.<sup>10</sup> This challenges any sharp division between individual ethics and collective responsibility, instead proposing a relational ethics where the two co-define each other.

Bujo’s position must also be understood as part of a wider movement in postcolonial African thought to reconstruct ethics on African terms, while remaining open to meaningful dialogue with global traditions. As Wilson Maina notes, Bujo’s ethics reflect a “reciprocal dialectic” between African thought and Catholic theology, grounded in cultural authenticity but receptive to Christian values that affirm life, solidarity, and justice.<sup>11</sup> This dialogical model reinforces Bujo’s relevance beyond African theology, offering resources for a cross-cultural ethics attentive to memory, relationship, and moral responsibility.

Bujo’s framework, therefore, is not a static system but a living ethics, one that grows through tradition, narrative, and participation. It is this dynamic, memory-laden, and relational vision of the moral life that informs his understanding of communal ethics and the shape of moral responsibility in African contexts.

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<sup>7</sup> Bénédet Bujo, “African Theology in the Twenty-First Century: The Contribution of Anamnestic Solidarity,” in *Black Theology*, 14(3) / 2016, Equinox Publishing, pp. 185–197.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>9</sup> Bénédet Bujo, “Differentiations in African Ethics,” in *Differentiations in African Ethics*, Blackwell, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Thaddeus Metz, “Duties to Oneself in the Light of African Values,” in *Monist*, 108(1) / 2025, Oxford University Press, pp. 24–44.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson M. Maina, “African Communitarian Ethics in the Theological Work of Bénédet Bujo,” in *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies*, 21(2) / 2021, Sage, pp. 192–209.

## The Communal Foundation of African Ethics

African ethics is distinguished by its profound communal orientation. In many sub-Saharan cultures, moral reasoning begins not with isolated individuals but with the interwoven fabric of communal existence. John Mbiti's well-known dictum, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am," encapsulates this ontological reality.<sup>12</sup> It expresses more than social interdependence; it signifies that identity and moral agency are inherently relational. The individual finds meaning, responsibility, and dignity in the context of communal life.

This relational understanding is further developed in philosophical analyses by Ifeanyi Menkiti and Kwame Gyekye. Menkiti argues that personhood in African thought is not automatically conferred by birth but is achieved through moral maturity and social integration.<sup>13</sup> The community, through its recognition and moral frameworks, shapes individuals into persons. Gyekye offers a *moderate communitarian* response, maintaining that while community is central, individuals also possess inherent dignity and worth.<sup>14</sup> Both perspectives highlight that moral action and identity are rooted in communal relationships rather than detached autonomy.

Bénézet Bujo builds upon this foundation, proposing that communal ethics is not simply an anthropological observation but the very ground of moral philosophy in African contexts. For Bujo, the African community is a dynamic organism linking the living, the ancestors, and the unborn into a single moral horizon.<sup>15</sup> Ethical decisions must therefore account for their impact across generations, preserving and enhancing the communal life-force. This vision moves beyond Western individualist moral theories by locating moral responsibility within the continuity and memory of the community.

Recent scholarship reinforces these ideas. In his 2023 study on African values and moral responsibility, Molefe argues that ubuntu-based ethics sees the flourishing of the community as the ultimate measure of moral action.<sup>16</sup> Metz (2022) similarly contends that harmony and cooperation are intrinsic to African moral reasoning, framing obligations not merely as duties to

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<sup>12</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, 1969, p. 141.

<sup>13</sup> Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "Person and Community in African Traditional Thought," in R. A. Wright (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., University Press of America, 1984, pp. 171–181.

<sup>14</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 35–40.

<sup>15</sup> Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001, pp. 23–26.

<sup>16</sup> Motsamai Molefe, "Ubuntu and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of African Ethics*, 18(2) / 2023, African Ethics Press, pp. 45–59.

oneself but as collective imperatives.<sup>17</sup> Such approaches align closely with Bujo's insistence that ethics in Africa is fundamentally about sustaining communal bonds and promoting the dignity of all members.

Communal ethics also has a theological dimension in Bujo's thought. He maintains that divine justice is experienced through community and that God's call to moral life is mediated through relationships with others.<sup>18</sup> This sacramental view of community means that moral failures are not private transgressions but disruptions of the divine order embodied in the communal network. Conversely, acts of compassion, solidarity, and reconciliation strengthen not only human society but the spiritual vitality of the entire community.

In sum, the communal foundation of African ethics underscores a vision of moral life in which individuals are never detached agents but participants in a living moral organism. Bujo's moral framework emerges naturally from this foundation, portraying ethics as a communal, intergenerational, and theologically grounded reality that shapes every aspect of moral responsibility.

### **Moral Responsibility in Bujo's Framework**

Central to Bénézet Bujo's moral philosophy is his distinctive understanding of moral responsibility. Unlike many Western traditions that conceive responsibility as a primarily individual matter, grounded in personal choice, rational deliberation, and legal accountability, Bujo situates responsibility within the communal and spiritual fabric of African life.<sup>19</sup> In his framework, moral responsibility is relational, intergenerational, and deeply tied to the preservation of life within the community.

At the heart of this understanding is Bujo's notion of *life as communion*.<sup>20</sup> Human beings, according to Bujo, are not isolated agents but participants in a living moral organism that connects the visible and invisible realms: the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. A morally responsible act, therefore, is one that enhances and sustains this network of life, strengthening

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<sup>17</sup> Thaddeus Metz, *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent*, Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. 65–88.

<sup>18</sup> Bénézet Bujo, "African Theology in the Twenty-First Century: The Contribution of Anamnestic Solidarity," *Black Theology*, 14(3) / 2016, Equinox Publishing, pp. 185–197.

<sup>19</sup> Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001, pp. 30–35.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

bonds between people and safeguarding the vitality of future generations.<sup>21</sup> Acts that harm others, neglect communal obligations, or sever ties with ancestors are considered moral failures because they diminish communal existence itself.

Bujo's concept of *anamnestic solidarity* further expands moral responsibility by rooting it in memory and tradition.<sup>22</sup> Responsibility is not confined to the present or to immediate relationships; it extends backward to honour the wisdom and sacrifices of ancestors and forward to ensure justice for those yet to be born. In this sense, moral agents carry within themselves the living memory of the community and are accountable to a moral horizon much larger than individual experience. This vision challenges modern notions of moral neutrality and temporal limitation, offering a model where ethical duties are shaped by both heritage and destiny.

Recent contributions to African ethics highlight the contemporary relevance of Bujo's ideas. Molefe (2023) argues that ubuntu-based responsibility involves recognising one's actions as part of a shared destiny, where harm to another is harm to oneself and to the moral order of the community.<sup>23</sup> Metz (2022) similarly describes moral agents in African thought as co-creators of harmony, responsible for nurturing interconnectedness among individuals and generations.<sup>24</sup> These developments resonate with Bujo's theology, demonstrating that moral responsibility in African ethics transcends legalistic and individualistic frameworks.

Bujo also integrates a theological dimension into his account of responsibility. He views divine justice as inherently communal, asserting that God calls humanity to moral life not through abstract commands but through concrete encounters with others.<sup>25</sup> Forgiveness, reconciliation, and solidarity are thus not merely social virtues but theological imperatives that define responsible living. This sacramental understanding bridges African traditional thought and Christian moral theology, portraying responsibility as a spiritual vocation to uphold life and unity.

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<sup>21</sup> Bénézet Bujo, "African Theology in the Twenty-First Century: The Contribution of Anamnestic Solidarity," *Black Theology*, 14(3) / 2016, Equinox Publishing, pp. 185–197.

<sup>22</sup> Bénézet Bujo, "Differentiations in African Ethics," in *Differentiations in African Ethics*, Blackwell, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Motsamai Molefe, "Ubuntu and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of African Ethics*, 18(2) / 2023, African Ethics Press, pp. 45–59.

<sup>24</sup> Thaddeus Metz, *A Relational Moral Theory: African Ethics in and Beyond the Continent*, Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. 70–78.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson M. Maina, "African Communitarian Ethics in the Theological Work of Bénézet Bujo," *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies*, 21(2) / 2021, Sage, pp. 192–209.

In sum, Bujo's moral framework redefines responsibility as an inherently communal and intergenerational reality. It is exercised not only in personal actions but in sustaining relationships, transmitting ancestral wisdom, and preparing a just foundation for future generations. Such an understanding enriches moral philosophy by presenting responsibility as a shared, life-affirming endeavour that binds the human community together under divine and ancestral guidance.

### **Critical Analysis and Comparative Insights**

While Bénézet Bujo's moral framework provides a powerful reinterpretation of ethics through African communal thought, it has also sparked philosophical debate. Scholars have engaged with Bujo's concepts both appreciatively and critically, assessing their strengths and potential limitations when placed in dialogue with other moral theories.

One of Bujo's major contributions is his ability to challenge Western moral universalism. His emphasis on contextual, communitarian ethics has provided an African counterpoint to individualist models of responsibility found in deontological and utilitarian traditions.<sup>26</sup> In Kantian ethics, moral action is guided by autonomous reason and universal laws applicable to all rational agents. By contrast, Bujo asserts that moral life is shaped by interdependent relationships and ancestral obligations that cannot be reduced to abstract rules. This contextual grounding resonates with communitarian philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre but goes further by embedding moral agency in a cosmology of ancestors and future generations.<sup>27</sup>

However, this contextuality has raised questions about cross-cultural moral dialogue. Critics argue that if moral responsibility is too closely tied to specific communal traditions, it may risk moral relativism, making it difficult to adjudicate conflicts between communities or to develop shared ethical norms.<sup>28</sup> Molefe (2020) notes that while African ethics rightly emphasises relationality, it must also safeguard the intrinsic dignity of individuals, even when communal values might threaten personal autonomy.<sup>29</sup> Gyekye's moderate communitarianism similarly

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<sup>26</sup> Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001, pp. 12–15.

<sup>27</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, 3rd ed., 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Matolino, *Personhood in African Philosophy*, Durban: UKZN Press, 2014, pp. 45–47.

<sup>29</sup> Motsamai Molefe, *African Personhood and Applied Ethics*, NISC, 2020, pp. 20–25.

argues for balancing communal duties with individual rights, a tension that Bujo's theology sometimes leaves underdeveloped.<sup>30</sup>

Another critique concerns the role of theology in Bujo's ethics. By integrating Christian concepts such as divine justice and sacramentality, Bujo enriches African moral thought but also raises concerns about syncretism. Some philosophers question whether this blending risks subsuming African ethical traditions under Christian moral frameworks, potentially diminishing their independence.<sup>31</sup> In response, Bujo insists that his approach is dialogical, not assimilationist: Christian morality, when truly inculturated, must be reshaped by African communal categories rather than imposed as foreign doctrine.<sup>32</sup>

Despite these critiques, Bujo's framework has inspired constructive developments. Metz (2025) draws on Bujo's communal responsibility to theorise duties to oneself as co-defined by duties to others, creating a model of moral selfhood that is neither individualist nor collectivist.<sup>33</sup> Ikuenobe (2022) similarly expands on relational autonomy, showing that moral agency in African contexts is enriched by communal interdependence rather than diminished by it.<sup>34</sup> These analyses demonstrate that Bujo's insights can foster innovative philosophical dialogue with contemporary moral theory.

Bujo's ethics also offers resources for global issues. In debates on environmental ethics, his intergenerational and communal vision aligns with ecological approaches that stress responsibility to future generations and non-human life.<sup>35</sup> In political philosophy, his emphasis on reconciliation and solidarity provides tools for post-conflict societies seeking justice rooted in restorative, not retributive, frameworks.<sup>36</sup> These applications illustrate that Bujo's moral philosophy is not merely locally relevant but has the potential to contribute to global ethics, particularly where Western paradigms face limits in addressing collective and historical forms of responsibility.

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<sup>30</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 40–45.

<sup>31</sup> John Mary Waliggo, "Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency," *African Ecclesial Review*, 28(5) / 1986, AMECEA, pp. 260–262.

<sup>32</sup> Bénédet Bujo, "Differentiations in African Ethics," in *Differentiations in African Ethics*, Blackwell, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Thaddeus Metz, "Duties to Oneself in the Light of African Values," *Monist*, 108(1) / 2025, Oxford University Press, pp. 24–44.

<sup>34</sup> Polycarp Ikuenobe, "Relational Autonomy and African Conceptions of Personhood," *African Studies Review*, 65(4), 2022, pp. 800–817.

<sup>35</sup> James Ogude (ed.), *Ubuntu and the Reconstitution of Community*, Indiana University Press, 2019, pp. 100–104.

<sup>36</sup> Mpho Tshivhase, "Restorative Justice and African Ethics," *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 41(1) / 2022, pp. 10–12.

In sum, critical analysis reveals both challenges and opportunities in Bujo's moral framework. Its contextual grounding and theological depth distinguish it from mainstream moral theories, raising questions about universality and individual rights. Yet these same features offer a much-needed corrective to individualism and moral abstraction, making Bujo's communal ethics a vital contribution to intercultural and interdisciplinary moral philosophy.

## **Conclusion**

Bénézet Bujo's moral philosophy offers a profound reconfiguration of ethical responsibility through the lens of African communal life. His framework resists the dominant models of moral individualism and universal abstraction by grounding morality in the living memory, interdependence, and spiritual continuity of the community. The strength of his ethics lies in its rootedness: it draws from indigenous African thought while engaging constructively with Christian theological categories, producing a model that is both contextually faithful and normatively rich.

At the heart of Bujo's moral vision is the idea that the self is a communal being, responsible not only for personal integrity but also for the well-being of the social and ancestral network in which one participates. Moral responsibility, in this sense, extends beyond rational consent or legal accountability; it encompasses care for others, preservation of harmony, and respect for those who came before and those yet to come. His idea of *anamnestic solidarity* transforms ethical thinking from a present-centred enterprise into a moral participation in the flow of communal life.

Contemporary scholarship continues to grapple with and refine Bujo's proposals. Critics challenge him on issues of individual rights, theological integration, and the risks of relativism. Nonetheless, the enduring relevance of his framework lies in its ability to articulate a communal ethic that resonates with the lived realities of African societies and speaks powerfully to global concerns, reconciliation, justice, intergenerational responsibility, and moral belonging. In light of increasingly fragmented moral discourse worldwide, Bujo's call to re-centre community, memory, and life as the foundation of ethical thought is not only timely but necessary.

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