

Beyond Biological Family Ties: Unpacking the Complexities of African Family Systems



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ABSTRACT

The traditional notion of family in Africa has mainly been influenced by Western ideologies, which emphasise biological ties and nuclear family structures. However, African family systems are complex and diverse, encompassing a wide range of relationships and kinship ties that extend beyond biological family ties. This qualitative desktop and critical discourse analysis study unpacked the complexities of African family systems, exploring how they are constructed, negotiated, and represented in various socio-cultural contexts. Drawing on a critical discourse analysis of existing literature and cultural texts, this study examined how historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors shape African family systems. The study reveals that a complex web of relationships, including extended family ties, communal living arrangements, and spiritual kinship bonds, characterises African family systems. These relationships are often negotiated and constructed through cultural practices, traditions, and social norms. The study's findings challenge the dominant Western notion of family and highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of African family systems. The study recommends that policymakers, practitioners, and scholars adopt a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to learning and supporting African family systems, one that recognises and values the diversity and complexity of these systems.

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INTRODUCTION

The traditional notion of family in Africa has mainly been influenced by Western ideologies, which emphasise biological ties and nuclear family structures.¹ This notion has been perpetuated through colonialism, Christianity, and other external factors that have shaped African societies and cultures.² However, African family systems are complex and diverse, encompassing a wide range of relationships and kinship ties that extend beyond biological family ties.³ In Africa, the family is not just a biological unit but a social and cultural institution that plays a critical role in shaping individual and collective

¹ Monde Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members," *South African Review of Sociology* 48, no. 2 (2017): 49–69; Clifford O Odimegwu et al., "Family Demography in Sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic Review of Family Research," *Family Demography and Post-2015 Development Agenda in Africa*, 2020, 9–56.

² Jean Comaroff and John L Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa* (Routledge, 2015); John K Noyes, "Colonial Space," in *Encyclopedia of African Religions and Philosophy* (Springer, 2022), 133–34.

³ Racheal Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa," in *Information and Knowledge Management*, vol. 9, 2019, 7–13; John Ringson and Admire Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective," *African Journal of Social Work* 10, no. 1 (2020): 99–108.

identities.⁴ African family systems are characterised by a strong sense of community and shared responsibility, where family members are expected to care for one another and contribute to the family's well-being.⁵ However, this traditional notion of family has been challenged by modernisation, urbanisation, and other socio-economic changes that have transformed African societies and cultures.⁶

One limitation of the traditional notion of family in Africa is its failure to recognise the diversity of family forms and relationships that exist across the continent.⁷ For example, in some African cultures, family is not limited to biological ties but also encompasses spiritual and ancestral relationships.⁸ Additionally, African family systems are often characterised by complex kinship ties and relationships that extend beyond the nuclear family.⁹ Another limitation of the traditional notion of family in Africa is its failure to recognise the impact of colonialism, slavery, and other forms of oppression on African family systems.¹⁰ For example, the transatlantic slave trade disrupted African family systems and led to the loss of cultural heritage and identity.¹¹ Similarly, colonialism imposed Western values and institutions on African societies, leading to the erosion of traditional family systems and the imposition of nuclear family structures.¹²

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need to move beyond the traditional notion of family in Africa and to recognise the diversity of family forms and relationships that exist across the continent.¹³ This has led to a growing body of research on African family systems, including their construction, negotiation, and representation in various socio-cultural contexts.¹⁴ Premised on the foregoing contextual background, this qualitative desktop and critical discourse analysis study aims to unpack the complexities of African family systems, exploring how they are constructed, negotiated, and represented in various socio-cultural contexts. The traditional notion of family in Africa has been mainly influenced by Western ideologies, which emphasise biological ties and nuclear family structures.¹⁵ However, African family systems are complex and diverse, encompassing a wide range of relationships and kinship ties that extend beyond biological family ties.¹⁶ Despite this complexity, there is a notable lack of research on African family systems, particularly in the context of post-colonial Africa.¹⁷

Existing research on African family systems has focused primarily on the impact of colonialism, urbanisation, and modernisation on traditional family structures.¹⁸ However, there is a need for more nuanced and contextualised studies that explore the complexities of African family systems in the contemporary era.¹⁹ Furthermore, most studies on African family systems have been conducted from a Western perspective, with little attention paid to the voices and experiences of African individuals and

⁴ John S Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Waveland Press, 2015); Julius Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 48, no. 2 (2022): 1–22.

⁵ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members"; Odimegwu et al., "Family Demography in Sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic Review of Family Research."

⁶ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

⁷ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa*.

⁸ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

⁹ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

¹⁰ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa*.

¹¹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

¹² Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

¹³ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members"; Odimegwu et al., "Family Demography in Sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic Review of Family Research."

¹⁴ Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

¹⁵ Odimegwu et al., "Family Demography in Sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic Review of Family Research."

¹⁶ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa."

¹⁷ Noyes, "Colonial Space."

¹⁸ Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

¹⁹ Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

families themselves.²⁰ Premised on the preceding research problem and study gap, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- How do African family systems construct and negotiate kinship ties and relationships beyond biological family ties?
- What are the socio-cultural and historical factors that shape African family systems and their construction of kinship ties and relationships?
- How do African family systems represent and negotiate their identities and experiences in the context of post-colonial Africa?

This study contributes to the existing literature on African family systems by providing a nuanced and contextualised analysis of their complexities in the contemporary era. It also contributes to the development of a more inclusive and culturally sensitive understanding of family and kinship in Africa, one that recognises and values the diversity of African family systems and experiences. This study is justified because it addresses a significant gap in the existing literature on African family systems. The study also has important implications for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars working in the fields of family studies, social work, and development studies. Furthermore, the study's focus on the voices and experiences of African individuals and families themselves provides a unique and valuable perspective on the complexities of African family systems.

Structurally, this study comprises several sections, including, firstly, the contextual background, which articulates the background information on the traditional notion of family in Africa and its limitations. Secondly, the research problem is closely tied to the study's gap, research questions, contribution, and justification. Thirdly, the study presents a comprehensive literature review and theoretical framework which covers the overview of the existing literature on African family systems, including their construction, negotiation, and representation and analysis of the limitations of the traditional notion of family in Africa and the need for a more nuanced understanding of African family systems, to mention but a few. Lastly, the study presents its methodology, discusses the thematic findings from the literature, concludes, and provides implications and recommendations for policy and practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Critical Discourse Analysis, Postcolonial and Decolonial Theories

This literature review examined the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study of African family systems, with a focus on critical discourse analysis and postcolonial theory. These frameworks provided a crucial lens through which to analyse the complexities of African family systems and how power dynamics, cultural norms, and historical experiences shape them. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a theoretical framework that examines how language and discourse are used to shape and maintain power relationships.²¹ CDA is particularly useful for analysing how African family systems are constructed and represented through language and discourse.²² For example, CDA can be used to analyse how colonial and postcolonial discourses have shaped the construction of African family systems.²³

Postcolonial theory is a theoretical framework that examines how colonialism and imperialism have shaped the experiences of colonised peoples.²⁴ Postcolonial theory is beneficial for analysing the ways in which African family systems have been shaped by colonialism and imperialism.²⁵ For example, postcolonial theory can be used to analyse how colonial discourses have constructed African family systems as "traditional" and "backwards".²⁶ Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that examines

²⁰ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members."

²¹ Norman Fairclough and Isabela Fairclough, "Textual Analysis," in *Routledge Handbook of Interpretive Political Science* (Routledge, 2015), 186–98.

²² Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

²³ John L Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

²⁴ Edward W Said, "Edward W. Said-Orientalism. Pdf," 2007.

²⁵ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

²⁶ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

how multiple forms of oppression intersect and shape the experiences of individuals and groups.²⁷ It is beneficial for analysing how various forms of oppression, including colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, shape African family systems.²⁸

Decolonial theory is a theoretical framework that examines how colonialism and imperialism have shaped the experiences of colonised peoples and seeks to decolonise knowledge and power.²⁹ Decolonial theory is beneficial for analysing how African family systems have been shaped by colonialism and imperialism, and for developing decolonial approaches to understanding and representing African family systems.³⁰ Thus, critical discourse analysis, postcolonial theory, intersectionality, and decolonial theory provide a crucial lens through which to analyse the complexities of African family systems. These frameworks highlight how power dynamics, cultural norms, and historical experiences shape the construction and representation of African family systems.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative desktop and critical discourse analysis approach to examine the complexities of African family systems. This methodology is suitable for this study because it enables an in-depth examination of the social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape African family systems. Qualitative desktop research involves conducting research through secondary sources, such as academic literature, policies, and cultural texts.³¹ This approach was suitable for this study because it enabled a comprehensive review of existing literature on African family systems and an analysis of policies and cultural texts that influence these systems.

CDA is a methodology that examines the relationship between language, power, and social inequality.³² CDA is particularly useful for analysing the ways in which language and discourse shape our understanding of African family systems. This approach allowed for a critical examination of the power dynamics and social relationships that shape these systems. The data for this study were collected through a comprehensive review of existing literature on African family systems and an analysis of policies and cultural texts that shape these systems.³³ The literature review focused on academic articles, books, and book chapters published within the last 10 years. Policies and cultural texts were selected based on their relevance to the study's research questions. The following inclusion criteria guided the selection of literature: firstly, academic articles, books, and book chapters published within the last 10 years. Secondly, literature that focuses on African family systems, including their social, cultural, and historical contexts and thirdly, literature that examines the complexities and challenges of African family systems.

The following inclusion criteria guided the selection of policies: firstly, policies that focus on family and social welfare in Africa. Secondly, policies relevant to the study's research questions, and thirdly, policies published by reputable organisations, such as governments, NGOs, and international organisations. The following inclusion criteria guided the selection of cultural texts: firstly, cultural texts that focus on African family systems, including their social, cultural, and historical contexts. Secondly, cultural texts relevant to the study's research questions; and thirdly, cultural texts published by reputable sources, such as academic journals and books. The data for this study were analysed using critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis. Critical discourse analysis examined the language and discourse used in the literature and cultural texts to shape our understanding of African family systems. Thematic analysis identified and coded themes that emerged from the data.

Critical discourse analysis involved the following steps: firstly, identifying the language and discourse used in the literature, policies, and cultural texts. Secondly, examining the power dynamics and social relationships that shape these texts, and thirdly, the researchers analysed how language and

²⁷ Kelly J Cross et al., "The Double Bind of Race and Gender: A Look into the Experiences of Women of Color in Engineering," in *2017 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition*, 2017.

²⁸ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

²⁹ Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Duke University Press, 2011).

³⁰ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

³¹ Uwe Flick, "An Introduction to Qualitative Research," 2022.

³² Fairclough and Fairclough, "Textual Analysis."

³³ Egon G Guba and Yvonna S Lincoln, "Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research," *Handbook of Qualitative Research* 2, no. 163–194 (1994): 105.

discourse shape the understanding of African family systems. Thematic analysis involved the following steps: firstly, identifying and coding themes that emerge from the data. Secondly, examining the relationships between themes and the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts of African family systems, and thirdly, analysing how themes shape the understanding of African family systems.³⁴ In summary, a qualitative, desktop, and critical discourse analysis approach was appropriate for this study because it enables an in-depth examination of the social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape African family systems. The application of critical discourse analysis and thematic analysis will offer a nuanced understanding of the complexities of African family systems and how language and discourse influence the comprehension of these systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

African Family Systems: Construction, Negotiation, and Representation

African family systems are complex and diverse, encompassing a wide range of relationships and kinship ties that extend beyond biological family ties.³⁵ Various factors, including cultural norms, social expectations, economic conditions, and historical experiences, shape the construction, negotiation, and representation of African family systems.³⁶ African family systems are constructed through a process of socialisation, where individuals learn the norms, values, and expectations of their family and community.³⁷ This process is influenced by cultural norms and traditions, which shape the way family members interact with each other and with the broader community.³⁸ For example, in some African cultures, the extended family is seen as the primary unit of social organisation, while in others, the nuclear family is the dominant form.³⁹

African family systems are also negotiated through a process of power dynamics, where individuals and groups within the family and community negotiate their roles, responsibilities, and relationships.⁴⁰ This process is influenced by social expectations, economic conditions, and historical experiences, which shape the way family members interact with each other and with the broader community.⁴¹ For example, in some African cultures, women are expected to play a subordinate role to men, while in others, women are seen as equal partners.⁴² African family systems are also represented through a variety of cultural practices, traditions, and social norms.⁴³ This representation is influenced by cultural norms, social expectations, economic conditions, and historical experiences, which shape the way family members interact with each other and with the broader community.⁴⁴ For example, in some African cultures, the family is represented as a symbol of unity and solidarity. In contrast, in others, the family is seen as a source of conflict and tension.⁴⁵

Recent studies have underscored the significance of understanding African family systems in the context of contemporary social, economic, and cultural transformations.⁴⁶ For example, the impact of urbanisation, migration, and globalisation on African family systems has been a significant area of research.⁴⁷ Additionally, the role of women in African family systems has been a significant focus of research, with studies highlighting the importance of women's agency and empowerment in shaping

³⁴ Yvonna S Lincoln, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, vol. 75 (Sage, 1985).

³⁵ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

³⁶ Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

³⁷ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members."

³⁸ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

³⁹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

⁴⁰ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

⁴¹ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa."

⁴² Odimegwu et al., "Family Demography in Sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic Review of Family Research."

⁴³ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*.

⁴⁴ Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

⁴⁵ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

⁴⁶ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members"; Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa."

⁴⁷ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

family relationships and dynamics.⁴⁸ Thus, African family systems are complex and diverse, encompassing a wide range of relationships and kinship ties that extend beyond biological family ties. Various factors, including cultural norms, social expectations, economic conditions, and historical experiences, shape the construction, negotiation, and representation of African family systems. Further research is necessary to comprehend the intricacies of African family systems and to devise effective policies and programs that foster the well-being and resilience of African families.

Traditional Notion of Family in Africa and Understanding of African Family Systems

The traditional notion of family in Africa has mainly been influenced by Western ideologies, which emphasise biological ties and nuclear family structures.⁴⁹ However, this notion has been criticised for its limitations in understanding the complexities of African family systems.⁵⁰ This section of the literature review will examine the limitations of the traditional notion of family in Africa and the need for a more nuanced understanding of African family systems. The conventional idea of family in Africa has been criticised for its narrow focus on biological ties and nuclear family structures.⁵¹ This notion fails to recognise the diversity of family forms and relationships that exist in Africa, including extended family systems, polygynous families, and child-headed households.⁵² Furthermore, the traditional notion of family in Africa has been criticised for its failure to account for the impact of colonialism, urbanisation, and globalisation on African family systems.⁵³

There is a need for a more nuanced understanding of African family systems that recognises the diversity of family forms and relationships that exist in Africa.⁵⁴ This understanding should consider the historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors that shape African family systems.⁵⁵ Furthermore, this understanding should recognise the agency and autonomy of African individuals and families in shaping their family systems and relationships.⁵⁶ Recent studies have underscored the significance of understanding African family systems in the context of contemporary social, economic, and cultural transformations.⁵⁷ For example, the impact of urbanisation and migration on African family systems has been a significant area of research.⁵⁸

Additionally, the role of women in African family systems has been a significant focus of research, with studies highlighting the importance of women's agency and empowerment in shaping family relationships and dynamics.⁵⁹ In summary, the traditional notion of family in Africa has been criticised for its limitations in understanding the complexities of African family systems. A more nuanced understanding of African family systems is needed that recognises the diversity of family forms and relationships that exist in Africa. This understanding should consider the historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors that shape African family systems.

Conceptualisation and Theoretical Principles: Power, Ideology, and Discourse

This section of the literature review will examine the conceptualisation and theoretical principles that underpin the study of African family systems, with a focus on power, ideology, and discourse. These concepts are central to understanding the complexities of African family systems and how social, cultural, and economic factors shape them. Power is a critical concept in understanding African family systems, as it shapes the relationships between family members and influences the distribution of resources and

⁴⁸ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

⁴⁹ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members."

⁵⁰ Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

⁵¹ Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

⁵² Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa."

⁵³ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

⁵⁴ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members"; Odimegwu et al., "Family Demography in Sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic Review of Family Research."

⁵⁵ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa."

⁵⁶ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*.

⁵⁷ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members."

⁵⁸ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

⁵⁹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

responsibilities.⁶⁰ Power dynamics within African families are often shaped by cultural norms and traditions, which can perpetuate inequality and social injustice.⁶¹ For example, in some African cultures, men are seen as the dominant figures in the family, while women are expected to play a subordinate role.⁶²

Ideology is another critical concept in understanding African family systems, as it shapes the values, beliefs, and attitudes that underpin family relationships and dynamics.⁶³ Ideology can influence the way family members interact with one another and with the broader community, and can perpetuate social inequality and injustice.⁶⁴ For example, in some African cultures, the ideology of patriarchy perpetuates the subordination of women and girls. In contrast, the ideology of communalism emphasises the importance of collective responsibility and shared resources.⁶⁵

Discourse is a critical concept in understanding African family systems, as it shapes the way family members communicate with one another and with the broader community.⁶⁶ Discourse can influence the way family members construct and negotiate their relationships and can perpetuate social inequality and injustice.⁶⁷ For example, in some African cultures, the discourse of tradition perpetuates the idea that certain practices and customs are essential to African identity and culture. In contrast, in others, the discourse of modernity emphasises the importance of adopting Western values and practices.⁶⁸ CDA and postcolonial theory are two theoretical principles that are particularly relevant to the study of African family systems. CDA examines how language and discourse shape social relationships and power dynamics. In contrast, postcolonial theory examines how colonialism and imperialism have shaped the experiences of colonised peoples.⁶⁹

In the context of African family systems, CDA can analyse how language and discourse shape family relationships and dynamics, while postcolonial theory can examine how colonialism and imperialism have shaped the construction of African family systems.⁷⁰ Thus, power, ideology, and discourse are critical concepts in understanding African family systems and are shaped by social, cultural, and economic factors. Critical discourse analysis and postcolonial theory are two theoretical principles that are particularly relevant to the study of African family systems and can be used to analyse how language and discourse shape family relationships and dynamics.

DISCUSSION OF THE KEY FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE

The literature review revealed five major recurring themes that provide insights into the complexities of African family systems. These themes include (1) the diversity and complexity of African Family Systems, (2) power dynamics and social inequality, (3) the impact of colonialism and urbanisation, (4) the role of women in African family systems and (5) resilience and adaptation of African family systems.

Theme 1: Diversity and Complexity of African Family Systems

The diversity and complexity of African family systems emerged as a central recurring theme in the literature reviewed for this study. This theme highlights the diverse and complex nature of African family systems, which cannot be reduced to a single definition or structure.⁷¹ The diversity and complexity of

⁶⁰ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa."

⁶¹ Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

⁶² Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

⁶³ Fairclough and Fairclough, "Textual Analysis."

⁶⁴ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

⁶⁵ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

⁶⁶ Fairclough and Fairclough, "Textual Analysis."

⁶⁷ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa."

⁶⁸ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

⁶⁹ Fairclough and Fairclough, "Textual Analysis."

⁷⁰ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective"; Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*.

⁷¹ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members"; Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa."

African family systems are shaped by a range of factors, including cultural norms, social expectations, economic conditions, and historical experiences.⁷²

Postcolonial theory provides a helpful framework for understanding the diversity and complexity of African family systems. According to postcolonial theorists, the colonial experience had a profound impact on African societies, including the disruption of traditional family systems.⁷³ The imposition of Western values and norms on African societies led to the creation of new family forms and relationships, which often existed alongside conventional systems.⁷⁴ Decolonial theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexity of African family systems. According to decolonial theorists, the colonial experience led to the imposition of Western epistemologies and ontologies on African societies, which had a profound impact on African family systems.⁷⁵ The decolonial perspective highlights the need to move beyond Western notions of family and to recognise the diversity and complexity of African family systems.⁷⁶

CDA provides a valuable framework for understanding the construction of African family systems. According to CDA, language and discourse play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of African family systems.⁷⁷ The CDA perspective emphasises the importance of examining the language and discourse used to construct African family systems and recognising the power dynamics and social relationships that shape these systems.⁷⁸ The synthesis of the findings from the literature highlights the diversity and complexity of African family systems. The postcolonial, decolonial, and CDA perspectives provide a helpful framework for understanding the construction of African family systems, underscoring the need to move beyond Western notions of family. The findings from the literature also highlight the importance of recognising the power dynamics and social relationships that shape African family systems and the need to examine the language and discourse used to construct these systems.

In summary, this theme highlights the diverse and complex nature of African family systems. The postcolonial, decolonial, and CDA perspectives provide a helpful framework for understanding the construction of African family systems, underscoring the need to move beyond Western notions of family. The findings from the literature also highlight the importance of recognising the power dynamics and social relationships that shape African family systems and the need to examine the language and discourse used to construct these systems.

Theme 2: Power Dynamics and Social Inequality

Power dynamics and social inequality emerged as one of the central, recurring themes in the literature reviewed for this study. This theme underscores the profound influence that power dynamics and social inequality have on shaping African family systems.⁷⁹ The literature reveals that power dynamics and social inequality are deeply embedded in African family systems, influenced by a range of factors, including cultural norms, social expectations, economic conditions, and historical experiences.⁸⁰ Postcolonial theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the power dynamics within African family systems. According to postcolonial theorists, the colonial experience had a profound impact on African societies, including the disruption of traditional power dynamics and the imposition of Western

⁷² Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

⁷³ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

⁷⁴ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

⁷⁵ Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*.

⁷⁶ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*; Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (Routledge, 2018).

⁷⁷ Fairclough and Fairclough, "Textual Analysis."

⁷⁸ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

⁷⁹ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

⁸⁰ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members"; Odimegwu et al., "Family Demography in Sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic Review of Family Research."

values and norms.⁸¹ The postcolonial perspective highlights how colonialism and imperialism have shaped the power dynamics in African family systems and the need to recognise and challenge these dynamics to promote social justice and equality.⁸²

Decolonial theory provides a valuable framework for understanding social inequality in African family systems. According to decolonial theorists, the colonial experience led to the imposition of Western epistemologies and ontologies on African societies, which had a profound impact on social inequality.⁸³ The decolonial perspective emphasises the need to recognise and challenge the dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies that have contributed to social inequality in African family systems, and to promote alternative epistemologies and ontologies rooted in African cultures and experiences.⁸⁴ CDA provides a valuable framework for understanding the construction of power dynamics and social inequality in African family systems. According to CDA, language and discourse play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of power dynamics and social inequality.⁸⁵ The CDA perspective highlights the need to examine the language and discourse used to construct power dynamics and social inequality in African family systems and to recognise how dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies shape these dynamics.⁸⁶

The synthesis of the literature's findings highlights the significant role that power dynamics and social inequality play in shaping African family systems. The postcolonial, decolonial, and CDA perspectives provide a helpful framework for understanding the construction of power dynamics and social inequality in African family systems, highlighting the need to recognise and challenge the dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies that have shaped these dynamics. Thus, the theme "Power Dynamics and Social Inequality" highlights the significant role that power dynamics and social inequality play in shaping African family systems. The postcolonial, decolonial, and CDA perspectives provide a valuable framework for understanding the construction of power dynamics and social inequality in African family systems, highlighting the need to recognise and challenge the dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies that have shaped these dynamics.

Theme 3: Impact of Colonialism and Urbanisation

The impact of colonialism and urbanisation emerged as one of the central recurring themes in the literature reviewed for this study. This theme highlights the significant impact that colonialism and urbanisation have had on African family systems.⁸⁷ The literature reveals that colonialism and urbanisation have disrupted traditional African family systems, leading to changes in family structures, relationships, and values.⁸⁸ Postcolonial theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the impact of colonialism on African family systems. According to postcolonial theorists, colonialism had a profound effect on African societies, including the disruption of traditional family systems and the imposition of Western values and norms.⁸⁹ The postcolonial perspective highlights how colonialism has shaped the power dynamics and social relationships within African family systems and the need to recognise and challenge these dynamics to promote social justice and equality.⁹⁰

The decolonial theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the impact of urbanisation on African family systems. According to decolonial theorists, urbanisation has led to the creation of new

⁸¹ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa*.

⁸² Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

⁸³ Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*.

⁸⁴ Ramón Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 1 (2011); Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*.

⁸⁵ Fairclough and Fairclough, "Textual Analysis."

⁸⁶ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

⁸⁷ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

⁸⁸ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members"; Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*.

⁸⁹ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

⁹⁰ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

social and economic relationships that have disrupted traditional African family systems.⁹¹ The decolonial perspective highlights the need to recognise and challenge the dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies that have shaped the impact of urbanisation on African family systems, and to promote alternative epistemologies and ontologies rooted in African cultures and experiences.⁹² CDA offers a valuable framework for understanding the impact of colonialism and urbanisation on African family systems. According to CDA, language and discourse play a critical role in shaping our understanding of the impact of colonialism and urbanisation on African family systems.⁹³ The CDA perspective underscores the importance of scrutinising the language and discourse employed to assess the impact of colonialism and urbanisation on African family systems, and to acknowledge how dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies influence these dynamics.⁹⁴

The synthesis of the findings from the literature highlights the significant impact that colonialism and urbanisation have had on African family systems. The postcolonial, decolonial, and CDA perspectives provide a helpful framework for understanding the impact of colonialism and urbanisation on African family systems, highlighting the need to recognise and challenge the dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies that have shaped these dynamics. To this end, the theme "Impact of Colonialism and Urbanisation" highlights the significant impact that colonialism and urbanisation have had on African family systems. The postcolonial, decolonial, and CDA perspectives provide a helpful framework for understanding the impact of colonialism and urbanisation on African family systems, highlighting the need to recognise and challenge the dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies that have shaped these dynamics.

Theme 4: Role of Women in African Family Systems

The role of women in African family systems emerged as a central recurring theme in the literature reviewed for this study. This theme underscores the pivotal role that women play in African family systems, despite facing patriarchal norms and traditions that often restrict their autonomy and agency.⁹⁵ The literature reveals that women in African family systems are often expected to play multiple roles, including caregiver, homemaker, and economic provider.⁹⁶ Postcolonial theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the role of women in African family systems. According to postcolonial theorists, colonialism had a profound impact on African societies, including the disruption of traditional gender roles and the imposition of Western patriarchal norms.⁹⁷ The postcolonial perspective highlights how colonialism has shaped the role of women in African family systems and the need to recognise and challenge these dynamics to promote social justice and equality.⁹⁸

Decolonial theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the role of women in African family systems. According to decolonial theorists, the colonial experience led to the imposition of Western epistemologies and ontologies on African societies, which had a profound impact on traditional gender roles and relationships.⁹⁹ The decolonial perspective emphasises the need to recognise and challenge the dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies that have shaped the role of women in African family systems, and to promote alternative epistemologies and ontologies rooted in African cultures and experiences.¹⁰⁰ CDA offers a valuable framework for understanding the construction of women's roles in African family systems. According to CDA, language and discourse play a critical role in shaping our

⁹¹ Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*.

⁹² Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality"; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*.

⁹³ Fairclough and Fairclough, "Textual Analysis."

⁹⁴ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

⁹⁵ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

⁹⁶ Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

⁹⁷ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

⁹⁸ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members"; Odimegwu et al., "Family Demography in Sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic Review of Family Research."

⁹⁹ Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*.

¹⁰⁰ Grosfoguel, "Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality"; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*.

understanding of the role of women in African family systems.¹⁰¹ The CDA perspective highlights the need to examine the language and discourse used to construct the role of women in African family systems and to recognise how dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies shape these dynamics.¹⁰²

The synthesis of the findings from the literature highlights the significant role that women play in African family systems despite facing patriarchal norms and traditions that often limit their autonomy and agency. The postcolonial, decolonial, and CDA perspectives provide a helpful framework for understanding the construction of the role of women in African family systems and highlight the need to recognise and challenge the dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies that have shaped these dynamics. Thus, the theme "Role of Women in African Family Systems" highlights the significant role that women play in African family systems despite facing patriarchal norms and traditions that often limit their autonomy and agency. The postcolonial, decolonial, and CDA perspectives provide a valuable framework for understanding the construction of the role of women in African family systems and highlight the need to recognise and challenge the dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies that have shaped these dynamics.

Theme 5: Resilience and Adaptation of African Family Systems

The resilience and adaptation of African family systems emerged as a central recurring theme in the literature reviewed for this study. This theme highlights the remarkable resilience and adaptability of African family systems in the face of adversity, including colonialism, urbanisation, and economic hardship.¹⁰³ The literature reveals that African family systems have developed unique coping mechanisms and strategies to adapt to changing social and economic contexts.¹⁰⁴ Postcolonial theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the resilience of African family systems. According to postcolonial theorists, African societies have developed unique forms of resistance and resilience in response to colonialism and other forms of oppression.¹⁰⁵ The postcolonial perspective highlights how African family systems have adapted to colonialism and other forms of oppression, as well as the need to recognise and celebrate these forms of resilience.¹⁰⁶

The decolonial theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the adaptation of African family systems. According to decolonial theorists, African societies have developed unique forms of adaptation and resistance in response to colonialism and other forms of oppression.¹⁰⁷ The decolonial perspective highlights the need to recognise and celebrate the unique forms of adaptation and resistance developed by African family systems and to challenge the dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies that have shaped our understanding of these systems. This is particularly evident in Critical Discourse Analysis and the Construction of Resilience and Adaptation in African Family Systems. CDA provides a valuable framework for understanding the construction of resilience and adaptation in African family systems. According to CDA, language and discourse play a critical role in shaping our understanding of resilience and adaptation in African family systems.¹⁰⁸ The CDA perspective highlights the need to examine the language and discourse used to construct resilience and adaptation in African family systems and to recognise how dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies shape these dynamics.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰¹ Fairclough and Fairclough, "Textual Analysis."

¹⁰² Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

¹⁰³ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

¹⁰⁴ Makiwane et al., "Family in a Changing South Africa: Structures, Functions and the Welfare of Members"; Odimegwu et al., "Family Demography in Sub-Saharan Africa: Systematic Review of Family Research."

¹⁰⁵ Comaroff and Comaroff, *The Politics of Custom: Chiefship, Capital, and the State in Contemporary Africa*.

¹⁰⁶ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*; Gathogo, "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?"

¹⁰⁷ Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*.

¹⁰⁸ Fairclough and Fairclough, "Textual Analysis."

¹⁰⁹ Mafumbate, "The Undiluted African Community: Values, the Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa"; Ringson and Chereni, "Efficacy of the Extended Family System in Supporting Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: An Indigenous Knowledge Perspective."

The synthesis of the findings from the literature highlights the remarkable resilience and adaptability of African family systems in the face of adversity. The postcolonial, decolonial, and CDA perspectives provide a valuable framework for understanding the construction of resilience and adaptation in African family systems, highlighting the need to recognise and celebrate the unique forms of adaptation and resistance developed by these systems. As such, the theme of resilience and adaptation in African family systems highlights the remarkable resilience and adaptability of these systems in the face of adversity. The postcolonial, decolonial, and CDA perspectives provide a valuable framework for understanding the construction of resilience and adaptation in African family systems, highlighting the need to recognise and celebrate the unique forms of adaptation and resistance developed by these systems.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study hold significant importance for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. Firstly, it demonstrates the importance of distancing oneself from conventional, Western conceptions of the family when formulating policy. Policies that compel nuclear family structures or reject the legitimacy of extended kinship networks, communal living arrangements, and spiritual interactions may be inefficient or destructive. This is because these policies do not represent the real experiences of a large number of African families. Second, the findings of this study suggest that a culturally sensitive approach is not only beneficial but also essential for professionals working in fields such as social work, education, and healthcare. For the purpose of providing practical assistance and interventions that empower rather than disrupt, it is essential to have an understanding of the dynamics of power, the roles that women play, and the ways in which families in Africa cope with issues. In summary, the findings of this study indicate that the family research conducted by the academic community should be decolonised. To genuinely clarify the intricacies of African social structures, it is necessary to employ research approaches that put African voices and experiences front and centre, in addition to theoretical frameworks that elevate indigenous knowledge systems above Western epistemologies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings inform the following practical and actionable recommendations:

- It is the responsibility of policymakers to formulate and implement regulations that publicly acknowledge and provide support for the many varieties of African families. This includes legislation that safeguards the rights of individuals in extended families and polygynous relationships, as well as social welfare programs intended to strengthen existing community support structures rather than replace them.
- Regarding Practitioners: There is an urgent need to proffer tailored training programmes for social workers, community development, and healthcare practitioners that incorporate a full grasp of African family structures. Such training should focus on the historical backgrounds, power dynamics, and resilience tactics identified in this study. For instance, the content of the training should emphasise cultural competency. Its goal is to make sure that personnel working with African families can do so with both respect and success.
- For those who are doing research, this study recommends that more studies should continue to explore the complexities of African family structures by employing research approaches that are community-based and participatory, paying particular attention to African perspectives. To achieve rigour and novel insights, the studies should concentrate on how they adapt to contemporary problems such as the increasing prevalence of digital migration, climate change, and global economic shifts.

CONCLUSION

Beyond the traditional understanding of the family as a biological unit, this study aimed to explore the complexities of African family systems through the application of critical discourse analysis and qualitative desktop research. The research analysed the existing literature on African family systems, identifying five main themes that shed light on the complexities of these systems. The study revealed that African family systems are diverse and complex, comprising a spectrum of ties and structures that extend beyond biological connections. Several factors, including power dynamics, social inequality, historical colonialism, and urbanisation, impact these relationships and structures. The findings of this study

demonstrate that women play a crucial role in these networks and that African families exhibit remarkable resilience and adaptability when faced with challenging conditions. This study is of great significance because it enables us to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of African family structures. In doing so, it challenges frameworks that are centred on the Western world and demonstrates how diverse and demanding these frameworks are. By doing so, we are laying the groundwork for reconsidering how we develop policy, conduct operations, and conduct research in the future in a manner that is mindful of and relevant to diverse cultures.

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