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International Relations in Africa: not without Indigenous knowledge systems

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Abstract
The field of International Relations (IR) has come under increasing and sustained criticism for producing and disseminating a particular reading of European history, one rooted in violence, as if it were universal knowledge. Generations of students, academics, practitioners, and policymakers have been taught and socialized into accepting this violent historical experience as the norm and, implicitly, as a reflection of human nature. As a result, the dominant accounts of IR tend to foreground competitive, conflictual, domineering, power-seeking, and exploitative behaviours as defining features of international life. This understanding of IR marginalizes and often ignores Indigenous ways of knowing that emphasize relationality, solidarity, mutual care, and cooperative forms of social organization. In this article, we argue that centring Afrocentric Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS), particularly their conceptualizations of persons in IR scholarship, has the potential to move the field beyond its bleak and violent roots towards a more humane and relational epistemology. The AIKS-centred approach to IR is better suited to capturing the nuances of contemporary global life while speaking to the lived experiences of Africans and potentially other Indigenous peoples around the world.

Keywords: African Indigenous knowledge systems; relationality; IR; personhood; Ubuntu

Introduction

Collectively, we have over two decades of experience in International Relations (IR) and political science classrooms in both the West and in several African countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Senegal, Malawi, Ghana, and Zambia. In IR classrooms in Africa, professors are dressed in Western suits even in sweltering temperatures. Educators use IR textbooks from Europe and/or North America and cite Western theories and examples. They follow Western epistemologies and the colonial teacher-centred pedagogy of transmitting knowledge. Students are expected to memorize the content and reproduce it in exams. Copied from Western textbooks, class content,

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research, and teaching methodologies and pedagogies are disconnected from students' actual experiences and daily challenges, and African[1] knowledge systems. They are schooled in the so-called IR fathers, such as Thucydides and Machiavelli, and concepts such as the balance of power, among others. Still, they have very little understanding of Africa's contributions to knowledge in general and IR scholarship in particular. How can we address the scholarly and pedagogical challenges that undermine epistemological sovereignty and hinder a nuanced understanding of Africa's IR, challenges that make the continent 'sit uncomfortably with the discipline's main paradigms'?[2] What are the most effective ways to reform the discipline to ensure that the lived experiences, perspectives, and realities of African students are meaningfully reflected in their IR classrooms? This article argues that centring Afrocentric Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS), particularly their conceptualizations of personhood, is one of the most effective ways to overcome Euro-American parochialisms and ensure that the field of IR reflects diverse lived experiences and worldviews of Africans. It shows that focusing on AIKS as a unit of analysis in IR scholarship has the potential to move the field beyond its bleak and violent narratives to a more humane and relational epistemology.

Making the case for IR to adopt AIKS, especially their human-centred orientation, should not be misconstrued as an effort to romanticize Indigenous knowledge systems or practices. Like all human institutions and epistemic traditions, they contain internal tensions, vulnerabilities to exploitation, and instances of abuse. The argument, rather, is that AIKS, with their focus on relational ontologies, social embeddedness, and communitarian ethics, are better suited to capturing the nuances of contemporary global life. The emphasis is not on 'African exceptionalism,' but on recovering and centring humane traits that are yet to be sufficiently institutionalized and centred in mainstream IR scholarship. The core contribution of this article, therefore, is to demonstrate how integrating these human-centred ethical orientations can enrich IR, positioning the discipline to more accurately reflect the lived experiences of Africans and, potentially, other Indigenous peoples around the world.

The article is organized into four sections. The first section explores IR's Euro-American centricity to underscore the necessity for a broader and more inclusive approach to IR teaching and research. Next is the conceptualization of AIKS and their potential contributions to IR. To illustrate the viability of AIKS in IR, the article discusses the implications of AIKS for key IR concepts and approaches. The conclusion offers a succinct summary of the main arguments and their implications, while also identifying key areas for further research.

The epistemology problem in IR

Since its institutionalization as a distinct academic discipline in the twentieth century, IR has traditionally drawn its intellectual foundations and insights from European historical experiences, spanning from classical Greece and Rome through the rise of Western European states as global powers from the fifteenth century to the emergence of the United States as a global hegemon in the twentieth century. Immigrant scholars from Europe to the Americas, especially after World War II, together with

[1]Following Mudimbe's argument, the idea of Africa is an invention or social construct.
[2]Cornellissen et al. 2012, 2.

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their counterparts in Western European universities, organized Euro-American diplomatic practices and epistemologies into paradigms such as realism, liberalism, idealism, structuralism, constructivism, and feminism. Competition between these Euro-American perspectives has dominated IR teaching and research since then. Thus, the study of international affairs is best understood as a protracted competition between the realist, liberal, and radical traditions. Insights from Western authors and politicians such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and Hugo Grotius shaped the IR field. The defence of Euro-American international life and experiences has at times led to justifications of the allocation of what Michael Foucault calls biopower (the power to kill, to determine who lives, who has rights, and who can speak and be listened to) to powerful states. From an IR perspective, global economics, social and political relations, and their thought remain forms of war and destructive competition among and between superpowers with the sole purpose of acquiring national power in terms of military, economic, and technological prowess to the detriment of human life and the planet. The metaphor of sovereign power

> has notoriously confined the consideration of IR to the margins of Western philosophical traditions. It has also bequeathed to international thought … a metaphor which is at once powerful and in important respects misleading. International life, we are often told, is like the original state of nature, a state of war ceaseless and unedifying. The metaphor is powerful because it dramatizes what is indeed a prominent feature of the landscape, the absence of any central authority and the consequent possibility that states will choose to settle their disputes by recourse to arms rather than to law.[3]

In some areas of IR scholarship, sovereignty has implied violence and competition among superpowers, persistent anxiety for planetary annihilation, systemic violence against – and resource plunder from – marginalized societies in Africa, Asia, and other parts of the Global South. Most of this mainstream IR scholarship focused on theories and issues important 'to the great powers of the Eurocentric Westphalian system.'[4] They fail to address genuine global challenges, diversity, and equity concerns. The focus on Euro-American issues at the expense of issues of genuine global concern has necessitated reorienting the discipline towards new perspectives. Thomas Tieku notes:

> The failure of IR theory to account for the international life of global Southerners is a major weakness of these supposedly global theories, which, in fact, reflect the experiences and practices of a few state officials, transnational elites and organizations … [and] do not constitute the entirety of global life.[5]

Debates for establishing non-Western IR theory, pedagogy, and methodology abound. Scholars and practitioners have problematized Western parochialism and called for broadening IR praxis and theoretical horizons to engage non-Western

[3]Mayall 2016, 3.
[4]Tickner 2016, 158.
[5]Tieku 2012, 36.

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marginalized spaces, voices, cultures, and knowledges, especially in the twenty-first century global political, economic, technological, and social science landscape. Those who call for the broadening of the scope of IR argue that the teaching of Euro-American-based IR theories and perspectives contributes to the reproduction of 'Black skins, White masks' scholarship in places such as the African continent.[6] They promote the construction of decontextualized knowledges and the propagation of dominant Euro-American theories, pedagogies, and research approaches in African societies. Buying into claims of knowledge universality, these ideas and approaches to IR scholarship have prevented Africa-centred international knowledge and practices from emerging. Despite the widespread criticism of IR as 'too Western-centric'[7] and IR theories as 'abstraction[s] of Western history,'[8] few concrete alternative approaches and perspectives exist. This article suggests that an Afrocentric approach rooted in AIKS can contribute to the emergence of a genuine global perspective on IR.

Conceptualizing AIKS

AIKS, defined as African worldviews that 'shape consciousness and form the theoretical framework' through which knowledge is known, investigated, transmitted, critiqued, and reframed, have a lot to offer the discipline of IR.[9] Yet, it is important to acknowledge from the outset that the use of the terms 'Indigenous' and 'indigeneity' as prefixes for African knowledge systems remains highly contested within the African context. Some African intellectuals strongly oppose the use of these concepts, arguing that they are deeply loaded and historically rooted in colonial and derogatory discourses. The late Beninois philosopher Paulin Hountondji (1990) notes that the derogatory deployment of the concept of indigeneity raises serious concerns about the appropriateness of African scholars deploying it. Indigeneity was understood as a marker of backwardness or cultural stasis. It was used by colonial authorities and their intellectual backers to delegitimize African systems of thought by portraying them as archaic, uncivilized, or otherwise inherently inferior. Such characterizations were not neutral descriptions, but deliberate epistemic strategies aimed at undermining African knowledge systems, erasing Indigenous ways of knowing, and foreclosing their legitimacy within modern intellectual and political life. In this sense, the colonial framing of indigeneity functioned as a mechanism of epistemicide. From this perspective, employing such terminology risks reproducing stereotypes and reinforcing reductive portrayals of African systems of thought, rather than challenging the epistemic hierarchies that have long marginalized them.

But, like the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), we contend that the concept of indigeneity, when carefully defined and reclaimed from its colonial distortions, can serve as a powerful analytical tool. Similar to the way scholars such as Matt Wildcat deploy it, we see Indigenous ways of knowing as dynamic, adaptable, and also resilient.[10] Thus, AIKS derive from the wisdom of Indigenous African sages and worldviews that reflect African peoples' ways of knowing, understanding, and producing knowledge that are rooted in their

[6]Fanon 1952.
[7]Achary 2014, 16; Tickner 2013.
[8]Buzan 2016, 156.
[9]Owusu-Ansah and Mji 2013, 1.
[10]Wildcat and Voth 2023.

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lived experiences, cultural practices, relationships, and community responsibilities before European colonization of the continent. Although many aspects of Indigenous ways of knowing have undergone significant transformation, particularly those elements that Imre Lakatos would classify as part of the 'protective belt' of ideas, the core components of these epistemological systems have persisted, adapting to contemporary contexts while continuing to function as operative frameworks in modern Africa.[11]

AIKS are found in individual persons, communities, nature, and in all African forms of life. Knowledge is investigated, understood, and transmitted through media including names of people and places, proverbs, folklore, stories, music, dance, drama, art, symbols, rituals, myth and legends, beliefs and customs, religion, apprenticeship, and craftsmanship. Knowledge is also found in cultural heritages, values, belief systems, and histories that 'encapsulate the common-good-sense ideas and cultural knowledge of local peoples concerning the everyday realities of living.'[12] Acquisition and ownership of AIKS are collective with no copyrights. For example, no one can claim to have authored a proverb or a story. Understanding AIKS requires a grasp of the linguistic and cultural logic of a given community or ethnic group. Because this body of knowledge is vast, diverse, and difficult to fully enumerate within the confines of a short paper, we focus on one specific dimension: African conceptions of the person and their implications for IR scholarship.

Despite Africa's diversity, most African societies have developed broadly-shared, intersubjective conceptions of the person. The African worldview of a person, commonly referred to as *Umuntu* or *Omuntu* among the Bantu people of Africa, is an 'ontological living force.'[13] In African ontology, *Umuntu* is the vital 'force' in the cosmos with the potential to enter into a relationship with the physical and non-physical or transcendental world. The human being is bonded to all creatures because they are sacred and part of the community through which all beings live and share life.[14] Therefore, respect for humans, their social relations, and other life forms is key to AIKS. For example, among the Balega community of the DRC in Central Africa, shedding blood during conflict is a signal that a ceasefire has to be declared. Whenever that happens in times of war, kings/chiefs and community elders meet and immediately declare a ceasefire. Although this practice has evolved over time, the shedding of blood remains a profoundly sacred act within the Balega community, one that must be respected, preserved, and never taken for granted. Totems named after animals and plants are used to strengthen relationships among people, but also to protect nature. Among the Baganda of Uganda in East Africa, clans have totems such as elephants, monkeys, lions, pearls, trees, and rivers. The same exist for the Akans of West Africa. People from different communities refer to each other as uncles, aunts, brothers, cousins, and so on. This is similar to the worldview of the person or humans among many Indigenous communities in North America and Australia.[15] For example, Shawn Wilson notes that the Indigenous people of North America, and other parts of the world, have connections among themselves and with nature.[16]

[11]Lakatos 1970.
[12]Dei 2000, 113.
[13]Mayanja 2021; Temple 1959.
[14]Asante 1985; Sindima 1990.
[15]Wildcat and Voth 2023.
[16]Wilson 2008.

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These relationships are coupled with a taboo-protected nature. No one could kill or destroy another person's totem or cut down trees without permission, thus protecting the environment. Among the Akans, totemic animals are not supposed to be killed or eaten and must be protected.

Personhood (*Ubuntu*) and being a person (*Umuntu*) are not *faits accomplis*, achieved by being a biological organism. They are processes gradually achieved through socialization, relationships with other people and other beings, and by going through rites of passage. To become a person (*Umuntu*) requires education, rituals of incorporation, and transformation to learn social-communal fundamentals of knowledge and norms to enable 'what was initially biologically' attained personhood and social excellencies expected from a true human being who is fully integrated into the community.[17]

In the Ga tradition of the Greater Accra region of Ghana, the first stage of an individual's incorporation into personhood involves a twofold process with deep social and relational significance.[18] The first is the outdooring ceremony, held on the eighth day after birth in the paternal household. This intimate gathering, where the child is also named, is attended by immediate maternal and paternal family members as well as close community members. It marks the child's formal introduction to the world and to their kinship network. It signifies the beginning of the child's moral and communal life while affirming their belonging not just to a nuclear family but to a broader web of familial and communal relations. Abarry explains that the outdooring establishes the child's place within the kinship group (*wɛku*), where responsibilities, values, and identity are passed down. Through symbolic acts such as the pouring of water and alcohol or libation, blessings, integrity-instilling rituals, and ancestral invocations, the community collectively endorses the child's integration into their moral, spiritual, and social fabric. Gift-giving during this event serves both as a gesture of welcome and as an investment in the child's future social obligations and mutual support within the kin group. The second stage is the naming ceremony, a communal event where the broader community is informed of the child's names, formally welcomes the child amidst merry-making and gift giving. This act not only gives the child a unique identity but also reinforces communal recognition and acceptance. The naming ceremony is meant to deepen further the individual's social bonds and sense of belonging.

The rites of passage into personhood 'continue throughout the physical life of the person, during which the individual passes from one stage of corporate existence to another.'[19] Death is the final stage, when a good person is ritually incorporated into the wider family of the living, the dead, and nature. Menkiti stresses that African societies accept that

> personhood is the sort of thing which has to be attained and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's stations. It is the carrying out of these obligations that transforms one from the it-status of early childhood, marked by

[17]Menkiti 1984, 172.
[18]Abarry 1997.
[19]Mbiti 1990, 14.

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> an absence of moral function, *into the person-status of later years, marked by a widened maturity of ethical sense – an ethical maturity without which personhood is conceived as eluding one.*[20]

Personhood is realized through interconnectedness and interdependent relationships in one's community and beyond. Harvey Sindima notes, '[W]e cannot understand persons, indeed we cannot have personal identity without reference to other persons.'[21] Togetherness emphasizes relationships with people and nature. In the Chichewa of Malawi in Southern Africa, for example, the proverb *Kalikokha nikanyama; tuli tuwili nituwanthu* (what is alone is a brute animal; whatever or whoever has a partner/neighbour is a human being), emphasizes community. The Baganda proverb *Ekyalo ddiba lya mbogo: terizingibwa bwomu* (A village is like a buffalo skin: no one can fold it alone). The Akan proverb expresses it thus: *onipa yɛ ɔman* (a human being is a community). Gyekye argues that the Akan notions of personhood (*onipa*) are not only socially constituted, but individuality is realized within communal contexts rather than prior to them.[22] Mbiti reinforces the shared African ontological claim that the individual exists through and for the community.[23] The centrality of belonging is summed in an African saying, 'I am because we are and because we are, therefore, I am.'[24] Leopold Senghor describes the African understanding of the person as 'I feel the other, I dance the other, and therefore I am.' This reasoning springs from the reality that no one comes into the world as a fully developed human. We depend on others in the community to develop as human beings. One becomes a person through other persons. In other words, people in AIKS' conception develop their individual interests and personalities through other persons and the community.

Community connectedness transcends birth and death, and humans. It is a cycle of being that springs from the giver of life (God), supernatural beings (divinities and spirits), ancestors, the living dead (those who were known and are still in the memories of the living), the living, the unborn, and the environment (animals, plants, and other inanimate beings). For example, the living care for the common good for their sustenance and for the unborn. The community is the 'catalyst and prescriber of norms' and 'must therefore make, create or produce the individual, for the individual depends on the corporate group.'[25] Only those who have lived according to community norms and principles attain the ancestorship level. Belonging to a community implies participating, caring, sharing, and networking with community members and beyond. Ancestorship and belonging carry a moral and metaphysical undertone of living an exemplary life that could enrich IR theories, methods, and pedagogies in terms of drawing attention to the importance of co-existence and responsibility towards others in the human community and towards the environment. From this perspective, these life forms are all interconnected and reinforce each other. Generally, morality deals with right and wrong and serves as the standard towards which people in a given community are supposed to live to ensure peace, stability, mutual

[20]Menkiti 1984, 172 (emphasis added).
[21]Sindima 1990, 144.
[22]Ibid.
[23]Mbiti 1990
[24]Ibid., 141.
[25]Menkiti 1984, 172.

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coexistence, and harmony among people and with the environment. Within this context, mutual obligations between the individual and the community are paramount. In other words, the African conception of the person does not indicate that individuals lack personal interests or agency. Rather, individuals do have interests, but these interests are expected to be pursued within the broader social and moral context of the community, and with due regard for the well-being of the wider collective. Thus, the African conception of the person, while certainly not perfect and not without its own limitations, places a strong emphasis on communal well-being. It encourages individuals to orient their actions and aspirations towards the interests of the community. In this framework, individual interests are typically intertwined with communal interests, and the pursuit of personal goals is expected to occur within – and be constrained by – the broader moral and social framework of the community.

Within African conceptions of the person, relationality and interdependence are not merely philosophical commitments but are operationalized in concrete governance practices. This is particularly evident in Indigenous chieftaincy systems, where authority is exercised relationally rather than unilaterally.[26] Chiefs are expected to govern through consultative processes, drawing on the views of elders, lineage heads, and the wider community, with decision-making oriented towards consensus. The former President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, is quoted to have aptly captured this governance ethos thus: 'In our original societies, we operated by consensus. An issue was talked out in solemn conclave until such time as agreement could be achieved.'[27] Among the Ashantis of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, 'decision making used at all levels' of governance reflects relational accountability and collective judgement.[28] In practical terms, this means that before chiefs render a final ruling, they are required to consult systematically with sub-chiefs or elders positioned in front of them, behind them, to their right, and to their left. This spatially organized consultation is not ceremonial; rather, it institutionalizes inclusivity by ensuring that multiple lineages, constituencies, and perspectives are formally heard before any authoritative decision is reached. Governance, in this sense, is enacted through deliberation and consensus-building. This reinforces the principle that political authority is embedded in, and constrained by, the community. In this setting, legitimacy is derived less from coercive authority and more from the ability of leaders to synthesize communal perspectives into decisions that sustain social harmony and collective responsibility.

Moreover, AIKS' conception of the person encourages dialogue in governance. Wiredu explains that dialogue in the African governance system functions as a mechanism for generating compromise by helping key actors to set aside temporarily their deep-seated disagreements.[29] For Wiredu, dialogue, as an open debate with a view to persuading each other enables collective action even in the absence of shared agreement. Wane et al. note that dialogue is typically facilitated by a council of elders, chief priests, moral elders, and chiefs in African communities with decentralized systems such as the Acholi, Luo, and Keiyo in East Africa.[30] And in centralized communities, such as the Baganda, Yoruba, Mande, and Dagomba, it is the responsibility of the king and advisors to lead the dialogue in ways that preserve communal

[26]Wiredu 1995.
[27]Quoted in Ani 2018.
[28]Ibid., 274.
[29]Wiredu 1995.
[30]Wane et al. 2022.

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harmony and prevent political paralysis. Both Wiredu and Wane suggest an essential quality of a good leader or chief in Africa is to facilitate dialogue/debates, listen to all the people or their representatives, and ensure that consensus is reached on critical issues. Wiredu observes that the opinion leaders lead the dialogue with a view to arriving at joint decision-making points despite holding divergent views. Wiredu, however, points out that consensus does not mean unanimity. The key is to reach a collective decision without marginalizing dissenting voices. In the Akan system and indeed many of the centralized African political systems, the burden of accommodation, after a lengthy conversation, is placed on the remaining minority, who are expected to suspend their objections. Wiredu distinguishes the African consensus-based decision-making driven by dialogue or open debate from majoritarian rule, arguing that in consensus politics the majority does not simply override the minority but rather seeks to persuade them to endorse the decision, rather than merely tolerate it.[31] Among the Baganda of Uganda, the *Kabaka*, also called *Sabataka* (king), administered through the *Bataka* (chiefs) who oversaw the use of *taka* (land). The king was not referred to as a ruler but as a leader and judge who listened, negotiated, and sought the common good of all his people.[32] Meeting with the Bataka, the Sabataka was *primus inter pares*, an equal among equals who listened to them. Kings who were ruthless risked being eliminated. When a ruthless king went hunting, those who hunted with him assassinated him. On returning home, the code – 'a lion killed him' – was known throughout the kingdom. The Baganda proverb *Magezi muliro, bwegukugwako, ogunona wa munno* (knowledge is like firewood in the hearth, if you have none, you fetch it from your neighbour) emphasizes the epistemology of respect and solidarity for all people. Those in power are especially encouraged not to assume that they know everything.

The *Muntu* (human) is connected and belongs to the community after going through the necessary rites of passage.[33] The *muntu* is obliged to observe the social philosophy of *Ubuntu* (communal norms, values, ethics, and morals such as compassion, dignity, solidarity, harmony, care, and respect for humanity and the environment) in the interest of creating and maintaining community and cosmic integrity.[34] Such observances affirm one's humanity, maturity, belonging, rootedness, responsibility, and care for the common good. Desmond Tutu notes that,

> When you want to give high praise to someone we say, '*Yu, u nobunto,*' 'Hey, so and so has *Ubuntu.*' Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have.… A person with *Ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they are less than who they are…. What dehumanizes you inexorably dehumanize me.[35]

[31]Mandela 1994.
[32]Wamala 2005.
[33]Menkiti 1984.
[34]Ramose 1999.
[35]Tutu 2000, 31.

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Ubuntu ethics and morality deal with 'eco- bio- communitarianism' to maintain the practical order of things in the universe.[36] A greedy, self-centred, and evil person who destroys cosmological integrity or the common good is not worthy of personhood, while an ethical, generous, and relational individual is valued and respected in society.[37] For example, in East Africa, an adult who does not behave according to communal criteria is perceived as a child or a youth. In Tanzania, such a person is referred to as *mzee-kijana* (an adult who remained a youth). This does not in any way imply that, from AIKS' perspective, the person is inherently free from greed, self-centredness, or, in some cases, deeply harmful behaviour, nor does it suggest that humans are naturally ecologically responsible. Rather, it indicates that the conception of personhood with its strong social expectations, moral obligations, and communal accountability, is intended to discourage such behaviours by directing individuals away from practices that the African communities explicitly condemn. The centring of the individual within the community, sometimes described as communalism, does not negate or diminish the individual as such. Rather, it is grounded in an ontology of collectivity, in which personhood is constituted through social relations. Individuality is not erased but realized and given meaning within the web of communal life. Ontological collectivity 'we' begins by recognizing the ontological uniqueness of individuals 'I am.' Among the Baganda, the proverb *Kamu gwe muganda* (one by one makes a bundle) recognizes that strength lies in individuals forming a community. In this sense, the individual and the community are mutually constituted, such that the binary modes of thinking pervasive in IR scholarship and much of the social science literature do not readily apply in this context. Rather than standing in opposition, individuality and collectivity are co-constitutive and relationally embedded. The African conception of the person, described as an Indigenous African body of thought, is neither static nor a closed or specialized form of knowledge. Rather, it is historically dynamic and context-dependent, having evolved and changed in response to shifting social, political, and economic conditions.[38] As such, it is practised differently across time and space. In many contexts, particularly rural settings, the African conception of personhood has historically underpinned practices of communal living, shared responsibility, and social regulation.[39] These practices have often fostered social cohesion and informal mechanisms of accountability, including norms that discourage antisocial behaviour such as theft.[40] In parts of rural Ethiopia, for example, communally embedded moral expectations and kinship obligations have served as important mechanisms for social order and mutual support.[41] However, when similar communal norms are transposed into different social environments, especially urban settings across several African countries, they have at times generated adverse outcomes, including exclusion, patronage, and informal practices that undermine civic trust.[42] Moreover, African systems of thought centred on personhood and community have also been selectively invoked, manipulated, and, in some cases, abused, particularly by political elites. In the post-independence period,

[36]Magesa 1997; Tangwa 2006.
[37]Bayuo 2026.
[38]Gyekye 1997; Wiredu 1996.
[39]Fortes 1987.
[40]Mbiti 1990.
[41]Hamer 1994.
[42]Chabal and Daloz 1999.

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appeals to communal values, unity, and collective identity were frequently instrumentalized to legitimize authoritarian political practices, suppress dissent, and subordinate individual rights to claims of national or communal cohesion.[43] In contemporary contexts, aspects of collectivity embedded within certain chieftaincy and customary governance systems have likewise been mobilized in ways that do not necessarily enhance democratic accountability or good governance, especially where traditional authority becomes entangled with state power and elite interests.[44]

These dynamics caution against any romanticized reading of African systems of thought. While the African communitarian conception of the person contains important normative and social resources, they are also marked by internal tensions and vulnerabilities to political misuse.[45] Nevertheless, residues of these systems of thought continue to shape African political and social life. They influence how political community is imagined, how governance is justified, and how religious and moral obligations are understood and practised across the continent. Attentive engagement with these enduring intellectual traditions, therefore, offers scholars a valuable analytical lens for understanding IR, while remaining sensitive to their historical transformation, contemporary contestation, and misuse.

AIKS' potential contributions to IR

Applied to IR, African conceptions of personhood invite a rethinking of key IR concepts such as the international, state, sovereignty, state system, power, the relationship between the state and the individual, among others. They also challenge us to reconsider which issue-areas deserve to be prioritized in research, as well as the most fruitful unit of analysis in IR scholarship. When the African concept of personhood, constituted through relationality, social embeddedness, and moral obligation, is extended to the international realm, the international community will be seen not as a mere aggregation of sovereign units, but as a moral community embedded in norms, ethics, and shared practices that both constitute actors and regulate behaviour and sustain collective life.

Framed in the African personhood viewpoint, key international actors, such as individuals and states, are social beings animated by the spirit of interdependence, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility rather than radical autonomy and or self-seeking actors. The international system they inhabit is a community rather than a self-help system in the sense assumed by many mainstream IR scholars. The international system can be understood as a dense institutionalization of norms, practices, rituals, rules, and beliefs that generate meaningful forms of interdependence among states, political communities, and individuals.

This conception of the international moves decisively even beyond the English School's formulation of international society and thin social constructivist emphasis on shared norms and identities.[46] Instead, it resonates more strongly with thick social constructivist and practice-theoretical approaches that conceptualize the international community as a web of dense, networked associations sustained

[43]Ake 1996.

[44]Boone 2014.

[45]Gyekye 1997; Tieku 2012.

[46]See Watson (1987) for the conception of international society and Adler (1997) for the distinction between thick and thin social constructivism.

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through routinized everyday practices that are both local and global. But unlike some mainstream thick constructivist approaches that implicitly equate international norms and practices with value systems of powerful Western states, an African conception of norms would be explicitly plural and global in orientation.[47] Instead of privileging any single civilizational source, the community practices are seen as drawn from diverse historical and cultural experiences across different parts of the world. These practices are integrated into a normative framework that reflects the lived realities of multiple communities within the international system.[48]

Thus, unlike the narratives advanced by Eurocentric IR scholarship, which tend to exhibit a short historical memory, these international community practices are not recent inventions but the cumulative outcome of experiences that stretch back to the earliest forms of human social organization. Rather than emerging suddenly or 'magically' in 1648 or originating exclusively in a particular civilization or period, these practices reflect the interaction and sedimentation of human experiences across diverse regions and historical contexts. They are best understood as the product of the totality of global human experience, not as the expression of a single tradition, region, or geographic space.

From the African personhood perspective, ethical value or moral imperatives and practices are neither epiphenomenal nor merely regulative. They constitute the very foundations of international reality and structure, rather than simply influencing actors' interests. They generate shared meanings, shape actors' dispositions and competencies, and actively structure and drive behaviour within the international system.[49] Order is not imposed through coercion or material power, nor is respect for that order selectively applied. Instead, order is sustained through shared social expectations, moral authority, and historically grounded practices of coexistence.

In terms of statehood, AIKS' perspective indicates that the mere acquisition of territory, or the formal attainment of what Robert Jackson famously describes as *empirical sovereignty*, is insufficient for a political entity to be considered a proper state.[50] Statehood, in this framework, is not reducible to territorial control. Neither is it reducible to diplomatic recognition by powerful states within the international system, nor admission into any particular international organization, however powerful it might be. As opposed to the empirical statehood model, and like a person, an entity seeking statehood would need to undergo a process of moral and social maturation, accepting and internalizing the values, obligations, and responsibilities of the international community before it can be fully recognized as such.

Just as personhood is acquired through rites of passage, social recognition, and ethical conduct, so too must states demonstrate their readiness for membership in the international community by showing both the capacity and the willingness to uphold communal norms, moral obligations, and shared responsibilities. Recognition, therefore, is not unconditional; it is contingent upon socialization into a community of practice. States must be socialized, first and foremost, to think beyond narrow self-interest and to recognize that their interests are intrinsically intertwined with those of other states. Statehood, in this view, is co-constituted: it depends on recognition by others and on behaviour that affirms the collective good of the international

[47]Behera 2023.
[48]Acharya 2025 makes a similar call.
[49]Adler and Pouliot 2011.
[50]Jackson 1990.

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community. Accordingly, states must constantly reflect on how their conduct affects others and how their legitimacy is sustained through reciprocal recognition and responsible action.

This reconceptualization implies a significant departure from Westphalian statehood practices and indeed the conventional international recognition processes documented by mainstream IR scholars. The authority to endow or validate statehood would not rest disproportionately in the hands of a small number of powerful states, as is effectively the case within institutions such as the United Nations Security Council. Instead, primary recognition would emerge first from the immediate family or community, in this case, the region or continent, within which a prospective state is embedded. Only after regional acceptance, based on demonstrated adherence to communal norms, governance capacity, and moral responsibility, would broader international recognition follow.[51] This region-first approach departs from the traditional politics-first logic that has long structured international recognition practices. It also implies an evolution beyond the conventional IR skepticism towards norm-based state recognition, most clearly articulated in the work of Stephen Krasner and like-minded scholars, for whom recognition is treated as contingent, instrumental, and ultimately subordinate to power and strategic interest, towards a more globally grounded normative standard of state recognition.[52]

In practical terms, this would alter how independence and recognition processes are approached. For example, the independence of South Sudan would not have been treated as an end, achieved solely through secession and international endorsement. In contrast to the current model, independence would have been conditional. South Sudan would have been made to demonstrate its capacity and willingness to meet the social, ethical, and political obligations of both the African region and the international community, including the protection of human life, respect for human dignity, and the ability to govern responsibly. Recognition would thus be a process rather than a moment or event, earned through conduct, not merely declared through legal instruments.

The AIKS framework also reconfigures the relationship between the state and the individual. In contrast to Westphalian traditions that privilege territory and sovereignty as foundational principles, African political thought places the human being at the centre of political organization. When applied to IR, this human-centred ontology implies that the legitimacy of the state is inseparable from its treatment of its population. The international community, therefore, bears a collective responsibility to ensure that individual lives are not just protected but respected. The life of the individual, rather than the territory of a state, is what should be held sacrosanct within the international system. In essence, the conventional tension between humanitarian intervention and non-interference becomes largely moot. What would ultimately be enshrined and protected by the international community is not the inviolability of state borders, but the sacredness of the life of each individual within the international system. Territorial sovereignty, in this sense, becomes conditional rather than absolute, anchored in responsibility rather than control.

This human-centred logic aligns closely with some African-led normative developments at the turn of the twenty-first century, such as the principle of *non-indifference*, which marks a departure from strict non-interference and emphasizes

[51] Coleman and Tieku 2018.
[52] Krasner 1999.

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collective responsibility in the face of mass atrocity and human suffering. But it goes well beyond the principles enshrined in the Constitutive Act of the African Union, which are activated only in cases of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.[53] Under this framing, the obligation to protect individuals does not require conditions to deteriorate to the level of mass slaughter before it is invoked. In lieu of the current territorial sovereignty norm, the practice would be to protect and respect as much as possible every single individual life in the international system, similarly to the way that lives are expected to be protected and respected within domestic political boundaries.

AIKS would move us away from the existing system in which the value of human life is often contingent on the state or political community to which one belongs, where some lives are implicitly valued more than others. They would instead affirm a more egalitarian international order in which all human lives are valued equally within the international system. To put this in the language of humanitarian intervention, AIKS would resonate with, but ultimately go well beyond, the notion of *sovereignty as responsibility* advanced by many R2P (Responsibility to Protect) scholars.[54] They do not locate the responsibility to protect solely with the state. Rather, protection constitutes a shared obligation of both the state and the broader international community. Sovereignty, in this framing, can never serve as an excuse or a shield to obstruct collective action aimed at protecting human life. Humanitarian intervention, therefore, is not an exception to sovereignty but an expression of a deeper, morally grounded understanding of political responsibility.

Taken together, African conceptions of personhood offer a powerful reconceptualization of international politics, one in which states are moral actors, sovereignty is conditional, and the individual human being occupies the centre of the international system. Rather than a self-help realm governed primarily by power and self-interest, the international emerges as a moral community sustained through socialization, recognition, and shared ethical commitments.

Conclusion

Reimagining the field of IR through the lens of AIKS offers the discipline a transformative opportunity, one that centres ethical responsibility, relationality, and human dignity. Such a shift would not, in itself, resolve all global problems. However, it would hold the potential to fundamentally reshape how a new generation of scholars, diplomats, and practitioners engage with the world. It would, at the very least, move the discipline away from the dominant Hobbesian assumptions, marked by conflict, power, egoism, and state-centrism, towards a more Kantian orientation that values mutual respect, dignity of persons rather than states, rule adherence, and moral cooperation. AIKS would revitalize IR in that way would make it a more humane and ethically grounded field.

If IR theories, pedagogies, and practices were to take the African world of personhood seriously, with its emphasis on communal interdependence, respect, care, and shared humanity, the discipline would begin to transcend its historical biases. Such a turn invites the integration of Afrocentric epistemologies not as mere

[53]Kioko 2003; Tieku 2012.
[54]Bellamy 2022; Deng and Zartman 2002.

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add-ons but as foundational components shaping how international phenomena are understood and taught. Embedding AIKS in IR scholarship would challenge the long-standing dominance of Euro-American frameworks and open space for deeper engagement with the lived realities, contributions, and aspirations of not just African but other marginalized people in the world.

This reconceptualization is not only ethically urgent but strategically wise. The world faces intertwined crises, escalating conflicts, climate disruption, technological upheavals, and widening inequalities that cannot be adequately addressed through power-maximizing mainstream paradigms. What is needed is an IR that centres human well-being over national ego, that promotes cooperation over confrontation, and that values justice over mere order. As Frantz Fanon powerfully urges, intellectual and political actors must stretch their 'muscles and brains in a new direction,'[55] challenging the exclusions and silences that have shaped global knowledge systems.

Integrating AIKS into IR would thus represent both an act of epistemic justice and a strategic reorientation. It would invite the discipline to research back, critically questioning who gets to produce knowledge, what forms of life are considered valid, and whose interests are served by prevailing paradigms. In doing so, IR could evolve from a field obsessed with dominance and survival into one animated by mutual care, ethical accountability, and global solidarity.

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[55]Fanon 1963, 313.

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