



Case Studies

Cultural Revival Among Kikuyu Christians: Impact and Implications in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

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The Kikuyu people were exposed to Christianity in the year 1900 following the arrival of Reverend McGregor. Subsequently, an overwhelming majority of individuals have adopted Christianity, with more than 90% identifying themselves as Christians. Nevertheless, the amalgamation of Western and Christian cultures throughout history has posed difficulties for the revival of Kikuyu traditional rituals. However, Anglican Christians have observed a revival of Kikuyu cultural traditions in Murang'a County, Kenya, during the twenty-first century. This return signifies a deliberate embrace of traditions that were previously forsaken. The objective of this study is to discover and examine the revived cultural traditions within the Anglican community, such as the reverence of ancestors, the categorization of individuals by age, the act of sacrificing animals, traditional marriage ceremonies, and the use of traditional brew. The study investigates the impact of cultural revival on Kikuyu Christianity through qualitative methodologies, including observation and interviews. The primary findings indicate that cultural revitalization entails both benefits and drawbacks. On one side, it assists in resolving identity challenges and enhances relationships with the community and family. Nevertheless, it also cultivates duplicity, undermines the Christian belief system, and engenders discord within the Christian community. These findings emphasize the necessity for dialogue among Kikuyu Christians to reconcile traditional behaviors with Christian principles. This will promote an authentic African Christianity that embraces Christian values while recognizing and integrating indigenous heritage. This study adds to the current discussion on the relationship between culture and religion in modern African settings by examining the intricacies and impacts of cultural resurgence in Christian communities.

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Introduction

Before Jesus went back to heaven, He ordained his disciple to continue the work He had started all over the world. The Gospel according to Mathew ends with Jesus commissioning the disciples to go out and convert all nations into what He had taught and commanded them. Mathew 28: 18-20 says;

Then Jesus came to them and said; “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father, and of the son and of the holy spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”.

This great commission by Christ to his disciples was the beginning of an evangelical Christian Church. The disciples were given a duty which they undertook with zeal because the reward was a guaranteed eternal life in heaven. This great duty

has achieved great success the world over and Christianity has reached almost all the corners of the world. It is arguably the largest religion in the world today at 32.3% of the world population (Dawes, 2021).

From the book of Acts of the Apostles onwards, missionaries have crisscrossed the world with the Good News and converted millions of adherents. This enterprise is still ongoing. Among the key goals of this evangelism is a change of behaviour and the lifestyle of the converted. Converts are expected to take new names and adopt a new Christian culture. There have been some instances where communities have been allowed to keep some of their cultures like the Gentiles were exempted from following the Mosaic Law in the council of Jerusalem in Acts: 15: 1-3.

In Europe, many communities were allowed to blend some of their cultures with the Christian teachings. Florovsky (1974) and Mugambi (1989) note that in the process of evangelization Christian culture and the culture of the host

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community often borrowed from one another. This is affirmed by [Judith et al \(2002\)](#) who says that the Christianity propagated in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century was quite different from the one that was preached in the 1<sup>st</sup> century

Outside Europe however, the privilege of maintaining some cultural elements of the host community was not availed. [Kivel \(2013\)](#) posits that Christianity which was a religion of love was turned into a religion of discoveries and conquests. It denied communities the freedom to practice and enjoy the spiritual wisdom of their forefathers. The missionaries who went to America and Africa desired to convert the communities in totality without considering their previous belief systems. [Mudimbe \(1988\)](#) observes that missionaries often neglected opportunities for cultural exchange with indigenous peoples, instead imposing a unilateral expectation for converts to relinquish their identities entirely, as their cultures were unjustly deemed primitive and unworthy of understanding God.

[Levy-Bruhl \(1975\)](#) posits that primitive mentality, which was associated with the natives of America and African, lacks the capacity to understand that which is almost instinctive and is not in a position to understand that which is godly. This perspective is supported by [Adamo \(2011\)](#), who suggests that missionaries held a belief that Africans lacked the capacity to comprehend God due to philosophical limitations attributed to their cultural context. Additionally, [Strayer \(1978\)](#) highlights the influence of pseudo-scientific racism on missionaries, shaping their perception that African religions were mere superstitions. Consequently, missionaries endeavoured to replace indigenous practices with Christian culture, perpetuating a colonial mindset rather than engaging in genuine cultural exchange.

In America the missionary endeavours to Christianise the Red-Indian serves as an example of evangelization beyond Europe. Young children were forcefully uprooted from their families and communities and taken to Christian boarding institutions where they were taught to hate their culture and language and to take up English names, language and the Christian culture ([Woods 2012](#)). The children were allegedly being saved from their savage parents. Laws were enacted forbidding the communities from practicing their religion or visiting their cultural shrines.

In Africa, [Kibicho \(1972\)](#) notes that the missionaries came with a predetermined mind that Africans and their religion were at the bottom of the civilization ladder which had Europeans at the top. Their religion and culture had to be discontinued and replaced with the Euro-Christian culture. This is collaborated by [Mokhoathi \(2020\)](#) who argues that the African religion was ridiculed as being heathenism. Thus, the missionary embarked on converting the Africans by conversion, coercion and any other means possible.

The return of converted African Christians to their religio-cultural practices has been constant in spite of efforts employed by the missionaries and other Christian evangelists. [Gehman \(1993\)](#) avers that the fear of converted Christians going back to their traditions is an ever-present trepidation among Christian evangelists. [Eakin \(2013\)](#), records the constant return of converted Anglo-Saxons to their pagan practices whenever the Christian evangelists left. This culminated to the Anglo-Saxons bringing into their Christianity some pagan practices.

The American Indians also went back to their cultural practices even after much pressure from the government and

the church. [Zotigh and Gokey \(2018\)](#) have documented the struggle of the community to regain their traditional religious practices which resulted in American Indian Religious Freedom act of 1978. The act allowed the community to pilgrim to their sacred sites and use their sacred symbols and objects after they had been outlawed for almost a hundred years. [Kivel \(2013\)](#) says that, religious visions are intrinsic to human beings and therefore indomitable and Christian efforts cannot destroy or eliminate them even by centuries of domination

The resilience of African religion among African Christians has been observed by many scholars. [Adamo \(2011\)](#) says that missionary Christianity in Africa is hypocritical in that the African Christian will rush to their traditional religious practice in the hour of need. [Muraya \(2013\)](#) observes that some Christians sing and pray expressing allegiance to Christ but once out of the Christian visibility, they revert to witchcraft where their trust and beliefs are. [Nyahela \(2015\)](#) posits that Christians secretly revert to their traditional religious practices when they encounter bewildering situations. [Akinmayowa and Rahman \(2019\)](#) say that patronage of African traditional religion is mainly utilitarian, Africans result to their religio-cultural practices whenever faced with difficult choices and ailments. This is supported by [Mokhoathi \(2017\)](#) who adds that due to the missionary pressure, the African deliberately juxtaposed Christianity and African Traditional Religion.

Among the Kikuyu, [Omondi \(2023\)](#) says that the Kikuyu will partake of the Holy communion in church on Sunday morning and go ahead to sacrifice the traditional way the same evening. This points at a converted community that still retains some of their traditions in secret. [Adamo \(2011\)](#) posits that the increase in the membership of African religions is alarming. This points at the rejuvenation of African religio-cultural practices among Christians. We purpose to identify the rejuvenated Kikuyu cultural practices and their effects on Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century considering the case of Kikuyu Anglicans of Murang'a County.

### **The Kikuyu Community.**

The Kikuyu are a Central Bantu community living in Central Kenya. Traditionally their religion was based on two main pillars, God whom they called *Mwenenyaga* and the Ancestral Spirits, *ngomi*, ([Leaky, 1977](#)). The missionaries found a monotheistic community and identified a lot of commonalities between the Agikuyu form of worship and Christianity, ([Kibicho 1972](#)). They adopted some of the Kikuyu community's ideologies such as the name *Ngai* for God, and Kikuyu tunes and rhymes in Christian songs. They also accepted Kikuyu symbols of worship such as drums.

The Kikuyu too found some similarities between the God they worshipped and the missionary God. As such they took up the missionary God and for the last 100 years, the Kikuyu have left their religio-cultural practices to the church. The Christian church has led the community in naming, circumcision, marriage negotiations, wedding and burial rites among many other social cultural activities.

However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed a rise in the number of Kikuyu cultural groups that have come up such as the tent of the living God, *Mungiki*, *Gwata Ndai*, *Mihiriga Kenda* and *Kiama Kia Ma*. These groups have stealthily crept into the Christian church and are leading Christians back to the

cultural practices they discarded over a hundred years ago. Omondi (2023) confirms that *Kiama Kia Ma* has recruited Anglican Christians to the level of the synod. Cultural practices that have been dormant for a century have been rejuvenated to the amazement of the church. This paper sought to identify cultural practices that have rejuvenated among the Kikuyu and the effects of the rejuvenation of the cultural practices on Christians basing the study on Anglican Christians who have joined *Kiama kia Ma* in Murang'a County, Kenya.

### 3.1 Rejuvenated Kikuyu Cultural Practices.

The Study identified age grading as one of the main cultural practices that have rejuvenated. This is a process through which a man rises in the social-political ladder of eldership. It involves the offering of goats to other elders of a higher rank who in turn sacrifice the goats for social, political and spiritual purposes. Through the sacrifices one is connected to his ancestors, *ngomi*, and to God who will guide the initiate into the future as a leader. There is a goat to be sacrificed at each level from the time the man is circumcised, when he marries and when his firstborn son is circumcised. The more the goats the higher the initiate climbs in the social-political ladder. This practice has caused acrimony between the church leadership and graded leaders as both would wish to guide the social cultural practices of the community.

Another cultural practice that has been rejuvenated is veneration of ancestors. Members of the community will let the blood of the ceremonial goat drip into the soil as a form of libation to the departed members of the family. They will also pour some traditional brew on the ground for similar reasons. Challenges such as poverty, infestation of jiggers, ill health and marital challenges are associated with angry ancestors. Efforts to address broken taboos and other failures of the afflicted, which might have angered the ancestral spirits if encountered by the living, are constantly employed. Once the causes are established, the ancestors are appeased to prevent any misfortune affecting or likely to befall the community.

The increase in the use of the traditional brew as a social drink and a way of blessings has resurged. It is important to note that the missionaries banned the drink and in extreme cases even planting of sugarcane which is an ingredient of making the brew. To date Kikuyu Anglican Christians are forbidden from taking all alcoholic beverages but church wine in Holy Communion. *Muratina*, the Kikuyu traditional brew, is now used to bless marriages, children, land and property. The drink has regained its place in the social activities. The drink will be required when people are negotiating bride wealth, celebrating child birth and to commemorate a milestone in the family or community. The drink is also used to call upon the participation of the departed as witnesses in social activities.

Animal sacrifices have rejuvenated. For many years the Kikuyu have accepted the Christian teaching that the death of Christ on the cross was last sacrifice, and that his blood precluded any other sacrifice. Goats are now sacrificed to induct initiates into age grades, to mark boundaries, to seal marriages and forestall calamities or spells directed to a family or the community (Hefner, 1980). The sacrifices are also offered as a form of prayers in times of challenges beyond human control. The choice of the animal to be sacrificed is elaborate and not all animals may be sacrificed. Different portions of the sacrificial

animals are used for different purposes. The diaphragm for instance is used to read messages from the ancestors while the fats are burned to send the scent to God who will accept or reject the sacrifice. Such sacrifices are conducted by specialists and elders who have been graded to certain levels.

### 3.2 Effects of the Rejuvenation of Kikuyu Cultural Practices

Among the major effects of the rejuvenation of Kikuyu cultural practices is the undermining of family worship. Families that have fellowshiped together for many years find themselves in an estranged situation. Although only men sacrifice in the traditional shrines, portions of the sacrificial meat are supposed to be shared with the family. The wife particularly has to take some portions that will grade her as an elder in the women's guild. By the time the husband has offered three goats, the wife is a *nyakinyua*. This means she is a female elder. The challenge comes when woman or her children refuse to take the meat portions mainly for religious reasons. Because these portions can only be shared with family members, failure to comply with the man's demands causes family strife. In such situations, family harmony is compromised and with-it family worship.

The Anglican church is very particular on family worship the inability of the family to pray together creates a gap in the family and in the church. Where the wife accepts to partake in the ceremonial meat portions, she finds herself in a dilemma. She may not reveal her faith in Kikuyu cultural practices because the husband warns her against revealing the secrets of the group. She is also afraid of other Christian faithful because they might treat her like a backslider. She is therefore forced to live in secrecy as she is unable to share with members of her Christian fellowship.

The resurgence of Kikuyu cultural practice has enfeebled Christian's faith on the blood of Christ. Anglicans believe that the blood of Christ is sufficient for all spiritual and physical needs of the Christian. Whatever the challenge, Christians are able to overcome by faith and prayers. However, Kikuyu Christians are sacrificing goats when they feel the challenge they are facing cannot be overcome through prayers and the blood of Christ. This is an indication that their faith in the salvific power of the blood of Christ has been diluted. According to the elders, there are some conditions that can only be solved in the traditional way and no number of prayers can bring a solution. This study established that many people join the groups that practice Kikuyu cultural practices such as *Kiama kia Ma* either to be helped to solve social challenges or out of fear of misfortunes and calamities which they believe could befall them for not following the traditions of their forefathers.

Syncretism has been introduced into Anglican worship by the rejuvenation of Kikuyu cultural practices. The elders who partake in the rejuvenated cultural practices do not leave the Anglican church. They continue fellowshiping in the church while at the same time participating in their cultural practice. This is an indication that the elders want to incorporate their practices in the Anglican worship. Among the items requested from the boys who were circumcised in the Kikuyu traditional camp in December, 2023 at Trinity school was the Good News Bible. This means that the elders are mixing Anglican Christianity and Kikuyu cultural practices. syncretism is one of

the ideas rejected by the Anglican Church in Murang'a as it is seen to sully the purity of the Christian faith.

There is evidence of division among Christians. Boys circumcised in the church camps and those who are circumcised in *Kiama kia Ma* camps are unable to relate yet they share the same schools, same churches and same villages. Those who are circumcised in the church feel holier than their counter parts who on the other hand feel that they have been circumcised in the right way, thus they are more mature. The difference plays out in church and especially in the relationship with girls. Men who have offered goats also discriminate against Christians who have not offered goats. For instance, those who have offered goats cannot speak in the marriage negotiations of those who haven't been graded even where they fellowship together. This concept of us versus them has a negative effect on Christian fellowship in the Anglican church.

Hypocrisy among Christians is a major effect of the rejuvenation of Kikuyu cultural practices. This is mainly among the sages and the married women whose husbands have joined *Kiama kia Ma*. They conceal their patronising of the rejuvenated cultural practices and easily pass as any other Anglican Christians. Jesus many times such as in Mathew 6:2 warns against hypocrisy. This makes it a vice that should be avoided by all Christians. They however are unable to state their stand publicly and continue partaking their cultural activities in secrecy.

There are many challenges posed by the resurgence of Kikuyu cultural practices. However, the same has had its positive influence on the social wellbeing of the community. For a start there has been an active campaign for the young people to marry. A man cannot be graded as an elder before he is married. This is a positive act as it inculcates family values in the community at a time when the world is faced by serious challenges to the family. The advent of homo sexuality and the blessing of same sex unions in church, celibacy as a Christian doctrine in some churches and the recognition of the single parent families poses a danger to the family unit. For the Kikuyu, marriage is mandatory and this concept should be embraced by the church for both companionship and procreation.

Mudimbe (1988) singles out identity crises as a great challenge facing African Christians, the urbanised and the western educated in particular. This is brought about by the loss of the individual's religio-cultural history. The rejuvenation of the Kikuyu culture among Christians has responded to this challenge. Individuals joining the council of elders are expected to first trace their family (*nyumba*) and their clan (*muhiriga*). This places every individual to a certain family lineage and challenges each candidate to retrace his family background. The knowledge of individuals family background overcomes the identity challenge faced by many people.

Circumcision is arguably the most valued rite of passage among the Kikuyu. It is the gateway to maturity which comes with the right to marry and inherit family and community resources as well as participate in the community's political space. During the ritual, boys are expected to find sponsors (*atiiri*) who are more mature and who the parents believe can offer the young boys guidance in their social development. When these boys walk hand in hand with the sponsors, they are taught many things on their background and the social

responsibility to the family and to the clan. This enhances their relationship with their roots thwarting the identity crises that they would otherwise face.

Before the induction into *Kiama kia Ma*, the candidates are asked whether they are members of the Kikuyu community. The candidates reply in the affirmative that they indeed are Kikuyu. Only those who pass this initial test can be inducted. The congregation then sings a Kikuyu song which confirms all of them are Kikuyus. This further gives the candidate a tribal identity, a concept that has been heightened by devolution in the country.

The spirit of kinship has been rekindled among the Kikuyu Christians. Traditionally the Kikuyu community lived a shared form of living where virtues such as compassion, courtesy, friendship, kindness and brotherhood were inculcated. This is what Waweru (2011) refers to as *umundu* (the positive attitude one accords other and life in general). In most of the rejuvenated cultural practices, *umundu* is displayed in the sharing of all the aspects by all the members of the community. When sharing in a sacrificial ram for instance, there will be portions for the elders, junior elders, women, boys and children.

In internal affairs such as rites of passage, the same applies. In marriage there will be food and wine for everyone including passers-by. There will also be recognition of relatives such as grandparents, uncles, aunts the parents age mates and the suitors age mates. Members of the clan and even those that have been accorded abode in the community will also be appreciated. This brings about the spirit of kinship where every human being matters unlike in the Christian concept where things become personal. It is normal to hear an African Christian confessing of personal salvation, my personal saviour and my church. This form of kinship allows everyone to feel appreciated and accepted. He or she becomes a part of the group thereby thrashing the spirit of us versus them.

The resurgence of Agikuyu cultural practices has reignited debate on the place of African religio-cultural practices in the social wellbeing of African Christians. For a long time, Christian authorities have accepted that Africans partake in their cultural practices in secret as they continue professing believes in the Christian doctrine. That now the Kikuyu Christians have come out openly to perform their cultural practices, a forum has been created for African Christians to debate the social value of these practices.

The rejuvenation offers a forum for the assessment of the rejuvenated practices so that harmful, outdated and illegal practices may be discarded. From the time the missionary introduced Christianity to the Kikuyu community, no chance has been availed for the community to defend their cultural practices. Veneration of ancestors for instance is central to the Kikuyu community. Parents name their children after their own parents and it is of particular importance to remember those who have departed in the naming process. In some cases, people who were supposed to be born but were never born are remembered in the naming of children so as to appease their spirits.

Veneration of African ancestors to the Christian is tantamount to ancestral worship. Unfortunately, Kikuyu Christians don't understand why European ancestors are invoked through baptism and naming of churches in Kikuyu land yet the Kikuyu ancestors are forbidden. No church in

Murang'a County is patronised by a Kikuyu ancestor. It is St. Mary, John, Barnabas and other exotic saintly ancestors. Such questions are likely to be answered in a negotiation between the church and the Christians who are partaking in Kikuyu cultural practices. It is important to note that in all the Kikuyu cultural ceremonies, the ancestors are invoked. These are some of the practices that the Kikuyu Christians were forced to discard but are intrinsic to them. Despite convincing the world that they have been able to outlive them, the current dispensation is evidence that little has changed over a century later.

#### 4. Conclusion

Rejuvenation of African cultural practices have become rampant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Communities that have been evangelized and converted into Christianity are patronizing their cultural practices in large numbers. That these practices have survived a century of evangelization and conversion, there is reason to believe that the African Christian is unable to live without them. The time has come to look objectively at both the positive and the negative effects that the rejuvenation Kikuyu cultural practices is bringing to Christianity. Kinship, appraisal of the family unit, love and unity in the community and the care of the weak and vulnerable in the society are some of the positives that the church can tap. Hypocrisy, dualism, syncretism and the doubt of the salvific power of Christ are some of the negative elements that have crept into the church in the advent of the resurgence of Agikuyu cultural practices. The position of Christ in Christianity and the Christian life cannot be debated. We however agree that the rejuvenation has brought in both positive and negative elements in Christianity.

A dialogue between the Christians who have taken up their cultural practices and the conservative Christians who stick to the missionary Christian teachings is paramount if we are to have an authentic African Christianity. This will effectively accord African Christians the freedom Christ offers all those who come to Him. This way, African Christians such as Kikuyu Anglicans will be truly liberated from the cultural practices that have continued to entangle them despite embracing Christianity over a century ago.

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