Ndereba, K M 2021, 'The supremacy of Jesus Christ: a theological response to the resurgence of Mbũri cia kiama', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 40-57

The supremacy of Jesus Christ: A theological response to the resurgence of *Mbũri cia kiama*

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Abstract

Among the *Gĩkũyũ* Christians, there has been a push from the traditional council of elders to "return to our roots". Part of this return is the call to give away a goat or goats, called *mbũri cia kiama,* which is usually given to the council of elders as part of the progression of a man into the status of eldership. Some churches and church leaders have taken the position that this practice has no bearing on one's faith in Jesus Christ and that *Gĩkũyũ* men should see no harm in doing this. Further, it would be a sign of celebrating the *Gĩkũyũ* or African identity of Christian men. Utilizing Bevan's contextualisation methods, I make use of an integral approach to theological reflection by engaging Christology in the book of Hebrews with the anthropological findings of the aforementioned practice. I argue that while there are some positive elements in such practices including the African values of communality, mentorship and respect for elders, the covenantal underpinning of the practice obfuscates the New Covenant in Christ and should therefore be repudiated. I, therefore, show how the continuities and discontinuities of *Gĩkũyũ* culture and Christianity impacts African Christianity and African theology and suggest implications for Christian ministry.

Introduction: The Need for Contextualisation

This paper reflects on how the gospel intersects with African cultural practices, particularly the practice of *mbũri cia kiama* among *Agĩkũyũ* Christians. The paper reveals that contextualisation is necessary when it comes to such

cultural practices as it seriously considers the underlying issues while utilising the tools of theological reflection, including the Bible, communities of faith and church history. In the enterprise of contextualising theological reflection, several options have been proposed. This paper begins with the assumption that the gospel of Jesus Christ is unchanging and supra-cultural. Yet on the other hand, as the gospel interacts with different cultures, it must consider the contexts of the peoples that it comes across. Hesselgrave & Rommen (2000:11) consider the necessity of contextualisation as arising from gospel communication across cultures. Thus, models of contextualisation arise from the reality of considering how theological reflection can carefully and biblically engage with different cultural contexts. I make use of Bevan's (1999) synthetic model of contextualisation in this paper.

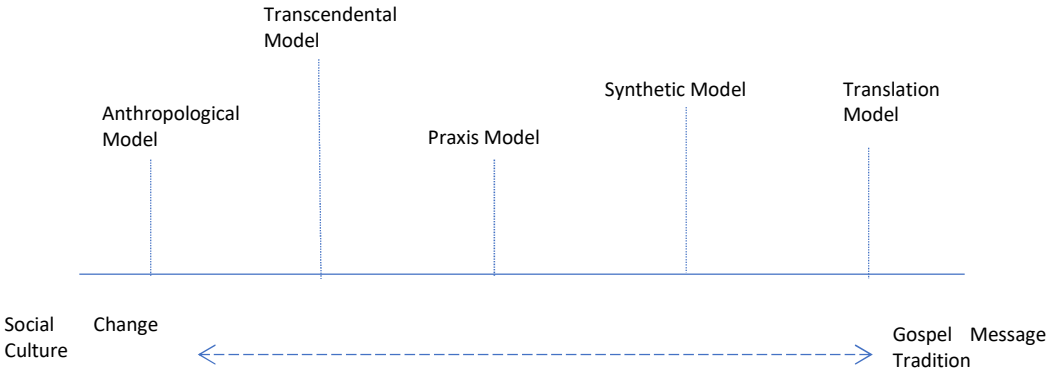

Figure 1: Bevan's models of contextualization

Bevans observes the necessity of contextualisation through the poles of social change (culture) and gospel message (tradition). Different models seek to balance these two aspects as illustrated above. Translation models remain as close to the text as possible with little consideration of the culture. Anthropological models take the culture seriously while downplaying the universalities of Christian doctrine. Among the other three models, the synthetic model seeks, the "difficult task" of balancing fidelity to scriptural revelation while deeply engaging traditional heritage in the past and present

(Bevans 2018:7). I think this is a helpful grid for considering African cultural practices because they have both positive and negative elements. Arguably, an integral vision for missiological engagement touches all the areas of the African's life, including their culture (Nkansah-Obrempong 2017:292). If the gospel message is to be embedded in African communities, it must engage cultural issues.

Integrating Christian theological reflection with cultural realities is premised on several reasons. First, Christianity does not belong to any particular culture. The late African historian and missiologist, Lamin Sanneh (2009) powerfully observed that the Christian faith is an act of translation into culture. Second, as Hesselgrave and Rommen (2000:2) show, the Bible exemplifies cross-cultural communication and engagement. The Old Testament reveals that although the Israelites were the chosen people of God, they were merely a means of blessing to all the nations (Gen 12:1-2; Ps 18:49-50; 57:11). In the New Testament, being justified by faith in Christ removes cultural barriers and unites Christians from different cultures (Gal 3:28-29; Col 3:11). The passage in Galatians speaks of justification while the passage in Colossians speaks of sanctification. In summary, being declared righteous in Christ and progressing in the new life are realities common to all Christians. Third, the end goal of cultural diversity is to show the riches of God's grace. In the book of Revelation, all ethnicities and nationalities will worship God together and proclaim his glory, which is seen in their redemption (Rev 5; 7:9-17).

Therefore, as Christians express their faith through the richness of their cultural diversities, the end goal is the glory of God in the redemption of his people. On the other hand, there are several ways in which our cultural expressions hinder God's will. One example is Peter who, because of his Jewish cultural background, was initially hesitant about God's inclusion of the gentiles (Acts 10:9-33). A second example is how we can entertain different cultural practices to accommodate everyone. This seems to have been the issue Paul had with Peter in Galatians 2:11-14 – especially seeking to accommodate cultural practices that were legalistic, that is, teaching that those particular cultural practices are what makes one a Christian. An extension of this may be excluding Christians of other cultural backgrounds because of practices that one culture holds in high regard. This can be seen in the decision of the church elders in the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:1-2. The last cultural issue is that of

breaking away from old cultural practices that would either compromise or take away from the work of Christ (Acts 15:28-29), in this particular instance the gentile or pagan practices of sacrificing foods to idols and sexual immorality.

I will proceed to unpack the specific cultural practice of *mbũri cia kiama* in *Gĩkũyũ* traditional culture. In this paper, I utilise such a synthetic model of contextualisation by making use of the doctrine of Christology, particularly as it emerges in the book of Hebrews, and its relationship with the presuppositions in the practice of *mbũri cia kiama.* I argue that some beneficial African values emanate from the practice, such as mentorship, communality, as well as the respect of elders. However, I also argue that since the practice is anchored in a covenantal understanding that is at odds with the New Covenant in Christ, the practice hinders Christian formation and should be repudiated, even as we explore relevant ways to nurture boys and men within African Christianity.

Christological Reflections in African Theology

Stinton (2010) interacts with the written Christologies of the Ghanian Bediako, the Tanzanian Nyamiti and the South African Mofokeng. She also interviews lay Christians and also leading African theologians from different theological backgrounds as follows:

- Benezet Bujo: Congolese, francophone, Roman Catholic
- Jean-Marc Ela: Cameroonian, francophone, Roman Catholic
- J. N. K. Mugambi: Kenyan, Anglican
- Anne Nasimiyu Wasike: Kenyan, Roman Catholic
- Mercy Oduyoye: Ghanaian, Methodist
- John Poebee: Ghanaian, Anglican

Her work is broad in scale and looks at various conceptual, methodological, practical, and contextual issues surrounding Christology. Bediako's (2013:17) call is to engage in theological reflection that is in touch with the grassroots, in his words "where faith lives". This type of theological reflection is in tune with the realities on the ground and removes the burden of academic theology as a

disengaged activity. Part of what this means is that African theological reflection must consider the unique worldviews that are a part of African traditional religions. For the Akan, for example, Bediako (2013:22) argues that a Christology that touches them must explore the theme of *Christus Victor* where Jesus Christ is seen as victorious over their spiritual world – including their supreme being (*Onyame*) and gods (*abosom).* Thus, considering each cultural context is key if the gospel message is to permeate deeply into the cultural soul. Stinton (2010:19) acknowledges Mbiti's pillars of theological reflection as the Bible, African tradition, lived experiences as well as one's theological tradition. I follow this similar concern by applying Christological reflection to the contemporary resurgence of cultural practices within Christian expressions of faith – with particular reference to *mbũri cia kiama* among *Agĩkũyũ* Christians – from a reformed and broadly evangelical theological background.

In both the global North and South, African culture is resurging within the Church. In America for example, there has been the rise of Christian groups such as the Black Hebrew Israelites. This group is largely made up of African Americans who trace their African lineage to the Israelites in the Old Testament. Their major conviction is the ignored black presence in the Bible and of peoples of African descent – although there have been commendable responses on this theme by several scholars.[1] This is to be understood from their location within the United States of America that has a long history of racial tensions. This has been recently protracted through the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and Critical Race Theory (CRT) debates in contemporary global discourse.

In post-colonial Africa, scholars have noted the rise of African Initiated or Indigenous Churches (AICs). These churches were formed to contextualise African culture within the Christian faith inherited from the missionaries and

[1] See for instance Thomas Oden, How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity (Grand Rapids, MI: IVP Academic, 2010); Harold C. Felder, The African American Guide to the Bible (Meadville, PA: Christian Faith Publishing, 2018); Eric Mason, Urban Apologetics: Restoring Black Dignity with the Gospel (Zondervan, 2018).

missionary-instituted churches. Some of the positive outcomes were the use of local languages in worship liturgies and the use of African expressions in songs and prayers. By and large, this is to be commended. However, in the recent past, traditional elders in various ethnicities in Kenya have issued calls to incorporate particular traditional practices in their Christian faith. Some of these practices are very syncretistic of the traditional religions and take away from the person and work of Christ. I will shortly pay attention to the specific practice of giving the *mbũri cia kiama.*

Mbũri Cia Kiama in Gĩkũyũ Tradition & Culture

Continuity and Discontinuity between Gĩkũyũ Culture and Christianity

The Very Rev. Dr John Gatu, past moderator of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, observes that there were many similarities between *Gĩkũyũ* as well as Old Testament worship. Gatu (2016:65) mentions monotheism, the deification of mountains and the sacrificial system as examples. Similarly, some of the oral narratives in the *Gĩkũyũ* culture have parallels to the Hebraic narratives of the Old Testament – similar to the Ancient Near Eastern background narratives and the Old Testament. They worshipped God, *Ngai* or *Mwene Nyaga* and observed the fig tree *Mũgumo* and certain mountains as sacred - such as *Kirinyaga* or Mt. Kenya to the North*, Kiambiruiru* (Ngong' hills) to the south, *Kianjahi* (Ol Donyo Sabuk) to the east and the Aberdares or *Nyandarua* to the west (Gatu 2016:65).[2] However, many traditional practices were against the faith, which churches such as the Presbyterian Church of East Africa rejected – this includes issues of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as well as the Mau Mau oathing.

[2] John G. Gatu says that diviners pointed to these four mountains, imitating the sign of the cross, before meditation. My late grandfather, a Mau Mau secretary turned Christian (Presbyterian) told me that in the past, before the 19th century missionary presence, there were discoveries of a cross in Gĩkũyũ land. This is an unsubstantiated anecdote. Kenyatta observes some cultural practices that are, in my observation, similar to the Old Testament sacrificial system: they offered sacrifices on specific days and seasons, the elders entrusted with the sacrificial duties were to observe sexual purity, recitation of special prayers, the abhorrence of witchcraft and their death penalty if discovered.

On the other hand, several discontinuities emerge. The concepts of God in biblical theology in light of *Gĩkũyũ* culture denotes several distinctions. For one, the concept of the triune God is something unique to the biblical understanding. Secondly, the work of Christ in redemption is also something unique to the biblical worldview, even though there were foreshadows in the *Gĩkũyũ* sacrificial system just as in the Old Testament sacrificial system. In short, there are both continuities and discontinuities in the area of Christianity and *Gĩkũyũ* culture.

Mbũri Cia Kiama as Part of Initiatory Rites into Adulthood

With many African cultures being hierarchical, *Gĩkũyũ* culture respected elders. Some *Gĩkũyũ* (2017) anthropologists observe seven critical stages between the birth and death of a *Gĩkũyũ* male:

1) *Gakenge* – A newborn baby for the first few months or so. After that he is referred to as *Kaana*, baby. Major ceremony – Being born, *gũciarwo* kwa mwana.
2) *Kahĩĩ* – A young boy frolicking about like a young kid goat. Major ceremony – The second Birth, *gũcokia mwana ihu-iinĩ*
3) *Kĩhĩĩ* – A big boy nearing circumcision which would be anything from 12 to 18 years. To be called a *Kĩhĩĩ (Kĩhĩĩ gĩkĩ)* is an insult as it is a reference to the fact that one is due or overdue for "straightening" or circumcision – n*ĩ ũtigĩtie handũ*.
4) *Mumo* – *Kiumĩri* (singular), literally means "coming out", "emerging" like a butterfly from a cocoon into the full bloom of God's creation. Circumcision ceremonies – These were the most important of the *Gĩkũyũ* ceremonies of coming out. *Mambura ma irua*.
5) *Mwanake* – A young man until marriage. God's material creation in its full glory. God, Ngai, did not create a child but a fully grown man. A young man is God's fragment that was fashioned into a man by the creator, *Mũmbi*. *Mwanake nĩ kĩenyũ kĩa Ngai*. *Mwanake wa Njaama ya ita* is a member of the warrior coupes, military. *Mwanake wa Njaama ya kamatimũ* is a member of the policing and guard coupes, police.

6) *Mũthuuri – Karabai*. A married man who can still be called upon to serve military duty in a major war.

7) *Mũthuri wa Kĩama* – An elder who serves in one or more of the many Councils. Because the *Gĩkũyũ* system of government had no chiefs or kings, all government was through consensus in the various tribal Councils.

After a boy was circumcised, he became a man but had to go through stages of preparation into eldership. Humphrey Waweru (2011:42) enumerates this preparation into five stages. The first stage was the council of boys (*Ngutu*), who had trained responsibilities such as organising games from the family level to the village level. The second stage was called the council of commons (*Kamatimu*). It was the warrior stage and was accessed through the giving of one goat, usually given by the father, and a calabash of beer. As junior elders, they are assistants and messengers of peace, to the senior elders. The next stage was the council of peace (*Matathi*). The condition for joining this council meant the stopping of raiding and having one's child circumcised (Muriuki 1969:162). A person was required to give another goat to the elders and Waweru observes that it took about 15-20 years to move to this stage. A mark of maturity in this stage ended in the initiate being given a staff (*Muthigi*) and leaves from a tree (*Matathi*). These junior elders would be given minor cases to exercise judgement, which was part of their ongoing training into the next stage. The next stage was called the governing council (*Maturungaru*). Through the giving of two extra goats, the elder was officially initiated into the governing council and is referred to as *muthamaki* or full leader. Because of the age requirement, wisdom characterised most of these leaders. If a young man exhibited high levels of wisdom, he would be approached and assisted to join the council of governing elders. It was possible to see a young man in a council of elders. The last stage was the religious council of elders (*Kiama kia guthathaiya*). The requirements were to have their children's children circumcised and his wife to be sexually inactive and to have stopped childbearing. This was the most honoured stage whose purpose was to offer

national and communal sacrifices and prayers. Few got to this stage.[3] Waweru observes that women also had their own councils within their different clans (*mnari)*.

The concept of sacrifice and intermediaries within eldership initiation rites

Sheep and goats were held in high regard in terms of their economic value. They were the currency of the day and it was said that "it is better to have sheep than to have a shilling because a shilling cannot give birth to another shilling" (Kenyatta 2011:45). Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president and a noted anthropologist, observes that these animals were important for the religious and cultural life of the *Agĩkũyũ* – they were used for purification and sacrificial rites among the *Agĩkũyũ*. They were also a prominent part of initiation into the council of elders. The anthropologist Louis S.B. Leakey (2007:207), who wrote the substantive three-volume work on the Kikuyu, *The Southern Kikuyu before 1903,* concurs on the importance of goats and sheep in the social organisation and religious rites of the *Agĩkũyũ.*

Mbiti observes the importance of sacrifices in African religions as the interaction of the visible and invisible worlds – and Karangi (2013:612-622) notes the role of sacrifices (*mathĩnjĩro*) as communication between *Ngai* (God) and his people. Mbiti (1991:63) distinguishes between sacrifices and offerings in that sacrifices involve the shedding of blood whereas offerings include the giving of things such as foodstuffs, milk, or honey. Mbiti (1999:66) notes that prayers are also involved through the giving of offerings and sacrifices. These are not always offered to God but can be offered to lesser spiritual beings – such as "divinities, spirits and the departed" (Mbiti 1999:66). Since in *Gĩkũyũ* traditional religion, priests, kings, the living dead and ritual elders are seen as mediators between man and God, then it would be fair to conclude that the eldership system in *Gĩkũyũ* traditional religion is also seen as a mediatorial office. Mbiti (1999:68) observes that in traditional African religions, "In order

[3] My late grandfather told me that before he became a Christian, he had started the initiatory rites to become part of the religious council. As a Christian, he served as a deacon in the Presbyterian Church for many years.

to reach God effectively, it may be useful to approach him by first approaching those who are lower than he is but higher than the ordinary person."

As earlier cited, some of the intermediaries here include the ritual elders. Mbiti acknowledges that in using the intermediaries, Africans do not directly worship them but use them as "conveyor belts" in showing their reverence in approaching God. The point seems to be that eldership is seen as a mediatorial office within *Gĩkũyũ* culture. Any religious functions in the *Gĩkũyũ* tradition had to be conducted by a priest – these priests comprised the head of the family or clan and was assisted by other junior elders (Leakey 2007:1082). Thus, the eldership system was also mediatorial in function. Since this cultural thinking is carried over into the Church, it is evident that there is a sense of reverence that is given to church elders.

The literature on the actual process of initiation into eldership is scanty.[4] However, from my research, it involved a call and response type of oathing that is similar in many other African cultures – and also a part of other *Gĩkũyũ* customs. Kabetu (2017:103) gives the oathing done during this process, after the meat was shared:

Atiririi kiama, tondu nitwaria ngoima cia ng'ania twamutonyia kiama-ini-ri, toigai kiama kiromwenda, magacokia: Kiromwenda. Toigai angikanatua cira urothira, magacokia: Urothira. Ugai angikanateithurana mbaara irothira, magacokia: Irothira. Ugai angikanahorohaniria kundu gutemanitwo, horohio io ironina uuru, magacokia: Ironina uuru. Ugai angikanaigwithania andu mahitanitie maroiguana, magacokia: Maroiguana.

[4] I personally tried to contact *Mũkũyũ*, who keeps the website *Gĩkũyũ Center for Cultural Studies*, for this specific information. I was informed that this information is only given to the initiates of these rites.

[ENGLISH TRANSLATION follows][5]

Now council members, since we have eaten the meat from this candidate's (name inserted) goats for his admission into the eldership of this council as one of us, say: May he now be admitted as a full member of the council.
And they reply: May he be admitted as a full member of the council.
Elder in charge says: Whenever he exercises judgement on whatever case that may be brought to him, may his judgement be final.
And members repeat: May it be final.
Elder in charge says: If he arbitrates where there are disputes or quarrels, may his word be final.
And they repeat: May his word be final.
Elder in charge says: Whenever he reconciles between fighting parties where injuries or blood has been shed, may his wise counsel end the bitterness thereof.
And they repeat: May his wise counsel end the bitterness thereof.
Elder in charge says: Whenever he arbitrates between two parties in dispute, may his counsel result in lasting peace.
And they reply: May his counsel result in lasting peace.

Afterwards, the new elder is inducted into the council and advised on the proper conduct of an elder and his manner of speech. He spends the rest of the days walking closely with the elders to understand the responsibilities of the oaths that he took. These initiation rites that are crucial for the lifecycle of the *Gĩkũyũ* man are also observed in other cultures such as the *Akamba* (Mbiti 1999:122). Chege (1985) also observes similar rites of passage among the *Ameru*, another close "relative" of the *Agĩkũyũ*. What is instructive is the place of offering sacrifices, usually a sheep or ram, during the rite of circumcision (*irua* in Gĩkũyũ) as well as the rite of *ntuiko* or *ituĩka* (in *Gĩkũyũ*) which refer to the handing over of judicial power to the next generation (or age set) of elders. Chege observes that these sacrifices were accompanied by the shedding of blood as a sign of thanksgiving to God as well as a libation to the ancestors (Chege 1985:55, 166). Among the *Ameru*, for the elders to serve in these

[5] By one of the old *wazees*, mzee Kimeria, that I interviewed for this research.

sacrificial rites, they had to have the right pedigree – character, age, proper teeth formation, proper birth process among others (Chege 1985: 123).

In summary, when considering the question of *mbũri cia kiama* it is necessary to consider the relationship between *Gĩkũyũ* culture and Christianity. First, we need to appreciate the similarities between Old Testament Judaism and *Gĩkũyũ* culture – and the same could be stretched to other African cultures. Secondly, it seems that to a large extent the practice of giving *mbũri cia kiama* reveals strong hints of animism as well as legalism. The animism can be seen in the shedding of blood as well as the pouring of libation. Since these practices have ceased under the new covenant, there is no longer any need for them. Legalism can be seen in the entire conceptualization of the lifecycle as a hierarchical process of growing from one stage to the next – through certain do's and don'ts. I think it is commendable that there was a strong sense of mentorship between the elders and younger men and that is something we have lost in contemporary and post-modern Africa, even within the urban African churches.[6] However, by and large, forcing *Gĩkũyũ* Christians to go back to this practice is similar to the Judaizing group of the early Church who was forcing the rite of circumcision for both Hebraic and gentile believers. I will now offer a biblical and theological response to support my point.

A Consideration of Christology in the Bible

The Old Testament similarities: The priestly and sacrificial systems

From the foregoing research, it seems that many African traditional religious and societal practices are very close to the Hebraic conceptualisation of the same. Exodus records the laws about altars (20:22-25), laws about restitution (21:3-15) as well as laws about social justice (22:16-23:9). Consecration of the priests is recorded in Exodus 29 with Leviticus expounding on the offerings and sacrificial system at length (Leviticus 1-7). I was struck by the many similarities

[6] This is the reason the Presbyterian Church of East Africa began the Rites of Passages (ROPES) programmes for the early adolescents who are transitioning into high school and who have undergone circumcision in order to pass on important cultural and Christian values.

between *Gĩkũyũ* traditional religious worldview and the Jewish religion in the Old Testament. These include the wide variety of ceremonial purification laws rituals including *rũruto* (misfortune), *mũrimũ* (disease), *ũrogi* (witchcraft), contact with the dead, contact with menstrual blood, and natural events among others (Leakey 2007:1232-1242). There are also similarities in the nature of the priests in the Old Testament and *Gĩkũyũ* traditional religion – who played a similar role to the *athuri a kiama*. These are just but a summarised version of the similarities between *Gĩkũyũ* religion and the Old Testament. However, the differences emerge in the New Testament interpretation of their significance.

The New Testament relevance of Jesus Christ as Sacrifice, Priest and Mediator

Although God related in a special way with Israel, his chosen nation, they were to be a channel of blessing to the nations. This is revealed not only in the Adamic covenant but also in the other covenants – including the Noahic, Abrahamic as well as Davidic covenants. In the Noahic covenant, God promises that he will never destroy the visible world as in the time of Noah. In the Abrahamic covenant, Abraham is promised offspring as many as the stars in the sky and the sand in the sea. In the Davidic covenant, David is promised a King who will sit on his throne and bring blessing to the nations. Although the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel accounts is mainly geared towards Israel, the entire Acts of the Apostles begins in Jerusalem but spreads to Judea, Samaria and all the world (Acts 1:8). The mission of Christ was not a privilege for only one culture but for the entire world.

The problem with some of the Jewish believers was that they struggled with cultural pride. Peter, the apostle, struggles with the vision he receives concerning the inclusion of the gentiles in the Kingdom of God (Acts 10). The elders have to make several decisions concerning Jewish-Gentile relations in Acts 15. In the Pauline epistles, Paul also tackles the issues of Jewish-Gentile relations and specifically rejects the sectarian groups that tried to force their cultural practices on the rest. In fact, on the matter of Jewish circumcision, Paul teaches Christians that this outward practice had spiritual significance. To go back to that practice would be to take the shadow instead of the reality, to which circumcision pointed to – that is the spiritual birth through the new

covenant promise (See Col 2:16-23; Heb 10). These issues are handled at length in the Pauline epistles.

The book of Hebrews is of particular significance in its exposition of Christology which is foundational to New Testament Christology (Parsons 1988:195-216). Kvidahl and Lioy (2020) note that the book's emphasis on the high priestly ministry of Jesus makes it unique within the New Testament corpus. The book of Hebrews looks back at the Old Testament figures and sacrificial system and finds its fulfilment and realization in Christ. So, for instance, Jesus Christ is seen as the Great High Priest in the order of Melchizedek, the Old Testament priest of Salem (Heb 4:15 - 7). This highlights the significance of Jesus Christ as the Supreme Priest-King (Num 24:16; Deut 32:8; Ps 76:2; 110:4). The High Priesthood of Jesus Christ transcends that of the Mosaic Law – the eminent John Owen in his commentary to the Hebrews (8:1-6) observes that Jesus Christ's priestly ministry is distinguished for its dignity, excellence, and efficacy (Owen 1980). Jesus Christ is also contrasted with the Old Testament priests in Hebrews 10:11-13. Although the Old Testament priests "stand" daily, and offer sacrifices repeatedly, their sacrifices cannot take away sins. On the other hand, Jesus Christ is "seated" at the right-hand God, offers a "single sacrifice" for sins which "perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (Heb 10:14). Jesus Christ is truly the King-Priest that the Old Testament predicts. Jesus Christ is also seen as the mediator of the New Covenant, which takes effect through the shedding of Christ's blood (Hebrews 8; 9:11-28).[7] In doing this, he makes some of the older religious practices obsolete (Hebrews 8:6-8; 13). In other places, Jesus Christ is referred to as the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5). The book of Hebrews sees Jesus Christ's death on the cross as the better sacrifice – that the sacrificial system of the Old Testament was merely a shadow of this great sacrifice on the cross (Hebrews 10:1-14). Jesus Christ is greater than the Old Testament religious system and through his various roles procures redemption, reconciliation, and victory for his people (Heb 2:14-15;

[7] One of the old *wazees*, mzee Kimeria, noted that the underlying issue in the understanding of the *mbũri cia kiama* is the concept of covenant. For the believer who is under the new covenant, the old covenant is made obsolete. He concluded that those who dub in both Christian faith and *mbũri cia kiama* practices are confused as they participate in two covenants, which is impossible.

4:14-16; 9:12, 15, 21-22, 28; 10:14). To go back to the old system would be not only retrogressive but "shrinking back" to slavery – even in the face of suffering for identifying and living for Christ (Heb 9:26-27; 10:39).

Conclusions and Implications for the African Church

Banda (2018:61) articulates the importance of Christology for the practical African Christian life. For instance, he observes that the fear that undergirds the African traditional worldview and which leads to excesses in our understanding of the spiritual life – including deliverance ministries and witchcraft practices – can be better understood by considering the effectiveness of the atonement of Christ. Part of this doctrine includes the importance of reconciliation, redemption, and victory, which are the various interpretive foci of the various atonement theories in the history of the church.

This paper has briefly explored the global resurgence of African cultural practices, and in particular, the practice of *mbũri cia kiama* in African churches. By doing this, this paper traced the continuities and discontinuities between *Gĩkũyũ* religion and Jewish religion in the Old Testament, as well as their interpretation in the New Testament. This interpretive key was offered through the doctrine of Christology, including atonement theories, the offices of Christ, and the new covenant, concepts that are at the heart of a covenantal and redemptive-historical approach to biblical interpretation. This paper offers the following conclusions:

1. African theologians should pay close attention to the African traditional religious (ATR) worldview and cultural practices. This is because they have a clear outworking in the practical life of Christians in Africa. Secondly, considering ATR is a helpful way of theological reflection that is contextual and relevant and honours the gains made by the forerunner African theologians including Augustine, Athanasius, Mbiti, Idowu, Bediako and Sanneh.
2. Theological reflection with African realities must robustly engage scripture. I suggest a redemptive-historical and covenantal hermeneutic as one that honours what the whole Bible says on particular issues and finds its centre in Christ. Even while we take our cultures as sources of theological reflection, biblical revelation is the

supreme authority – as per the reformed understanding of *sola scriptura* and *tota scriptura*.

3. African Christians can learn from their traditional culture. One positive lesson from the practice of *mbũri cia kiama* is the importance of mentorship with our African traditional cultures. Within contemporary African societies, many of the ills we are seeing, including family breakdown, complexities in adolescent development and youth transitions, could be minimised through mentorship. For African Christians especially, mentorship must begin in the home through family discipleship and in the church through holistic discipleship of young people.
4. Although African culture is highly oral, we must not use that as an excuse to disengage in Scripture study – with many translations available in local languages, Bible study must take a central place in African Christian practices. Additionally, Africans still pay more allegiance to their cultural practices rather than to their Christian convictions. Since we are a new body in Christ, our allegiance to Christ is what informs our core identity as Christians. Where there is a conflict between Christ and culture, it is clear that Christ is Lord of all – including culture.

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