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Contextualising Rites of Passage to Negotiate an African Christian Identity: A Kenyan Community in Liminality

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Abstract

In pre-colonial times, transitional rites of passage anchored individuals to cultural identity and norms in communities such as the Kikuyu of Central Kenya. Missionary and colonial work discouraged many of these rituals, eventually banning practices such as female circumcision. This caused disagreements among native Christian converts, with some opting to start their own churches and schools rather than abandon practices they considered core to cultural wholeness. A recent resurgence of quasi-traditionalist rituals alongside the advent of contemporary church-led adolescent rites of passage has generated hearty debate over how to appropriately contextualise cultural practices. This paper proposes that such disagreements are evidence of the wider Kenyan church in extended cultural liminality transitioning from missionary domination, post-independence optimism, and now wrestling with identity as African Christians. Focusing on the Kikuyu community as a case study, it proposes that healthy debate and critical reflection are crucial elements for ecumenical identity formation in a fast changing, globally connected, multi-ethnic nation.

Introduction

An article in the Kenyan *Daily Nation* newspaper in December 2018 declared,

> Kikuyu elders maintain that the church has no business engaging in the rite of passage [of circumcision] and that it

> has no structures to carry out any advisory role on the initiates. (Gachane 2018)

In pre-colonial Kenya, traditional rites of passage were core to the societal structures of many ethnic communities such as the Kikuyu people (Bunche 1941:49). They helped establish an individual's identity, sense of belonging, and social status as they transitioned from one stage of life to another. Early in the twentieth century, missionaries opposed and eventually forbade the transitional rite of female circumcision and related rituals among their church adherents, leading to divisions among African Christian converts. The cultural discontinuity that followed over the decades is among the factors often blamed for contemporary challenges involving youth in the country.

Over the last three decades, a growing number of Kenyan churches have sought to redesign elements of traditional rites of passage as strategies to minister to a disproportionately large youth demographic in the country (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019). In the same period, a reawakening of ethnic cultural celebration has led to questions over the rightful superintendence of such initiation rites. Self-proclaimed ethnic leaders charge that church-led rites of passage are acts of invasion into cultural spaces that usurp their rightful leadership (Mugambi 2023:53–54). They accuse churches of diluting core cultural practices and capitulating to Western hegemony. Within the churches is a mix of opinions on how Africans should contextualise the gospel. Some propose the bold use of traditional rituals and symbols, especially to celebrate life transitions such as weddings, leadership graduations, and adolescent rites. Others are wary of traditional practices which they deem syncretic, if not altogether antithetical to faith.

This paper explores possible historical sources of these disagreements, which have animated recent debate. It focuses on the Kikuyu, who at seventeen per cent constitute Kenya's largest ethnic community (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019:4.423), as a case study for how the church might engage this quest for sociocultural identity with a doctrinally sound and hospitable posture, safeguarding 'the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3). I cautiously propose approaching the conversation through lenses of liminality as Africans contextualise their faith in pursuit of an authentic African, Christian identity.

An African Identity

Diaspora scholar Afeosemime Adogame notes that African identities are as vast as the continent itself and are not static. 'Identities,' he writes,

> are actively constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. […] Every modicum of identity may be understood in terms of whether it is largely a self-ascribed, self-defined representation or a public-ascribed, reified identity representation of the 'Other'. (2014:13)

Historian Ali Mazrui adds that ascribed African identities have always been impositions of foreign invaders. European, Semitic, and Arab neighbours, he writes, identified sub-Saharan Africans as 'Sudan' or black, named the continent and '*continentalised*' it by demarcating territorial colonies (2005:75). Eventually, the quest for self-governance gave birth to African nations that needed to craft common identities and aspirations across diverse ethnicities, beliefs, cultures.

African identity is also self-ascribed and self-defined. Granted, it would be impossible to articulate an 'African identity' that adequately encompasses the continent's almost 1.6 billion people, whose estimated three thousand ethnic groups speak over 2,100 languages and live in fifty-four recognised countries. Nevertheless, Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa identifies spirituality and communal values as two useful overarching commonalities that traverse the diversity of African peoples (2013:4). Regarding the first, Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti famously declared, 'Africans are notoriously religious' (1969:1). African narratives perceive life as transcending the physical realm – preceding birth and continuing beyond death into the spirit world. The second African commonality is captured by the term *ubuntu*, humanness, from whence the expansive Bantu peoples derive their name. Mbiti summarises *ubuntu* relatedness with the dictum, 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am' (1969:108). One's identity is thus inseparable from kinship and is mediated by holistic spirituality that binds all things (people, the visible environment, and the invisible cosmos) past, present, and future.

Among traditional Kikuyu of central Kenya (the case-study focus of this paper), the most intimate kinship was the extended family (*mbarī*). It consisted of those related directly by blood and marriage, including cousins, uncles, and aunts broadly defined, and generations of grandparents. Conglomerates of distant *mbarī* relatives constituted clan (*mũhĩrĩga*) units, each of which descended from Gīkūyū and Mūmbi's nine daughters in Kikuyu origin lore. Although Kikuyus would introduce themselves citing their *mbarĩ* and *mũhĩrĩga*, it was the age-set (*riika*) system – established through a lifelong series of rites of passage – that united and solidified the whole community, ascribing social status and functional belongingness (Waweru 2011:36).

Kikuyu Rites of Passage

In his seminal 1908 text on rites of passage, ethnographer Arnold van Gennep reported on patterns of three stages he observed in many cultures during life transitions. Pre-liminal rites separated initiates from their old statuses; liminal or threshold processes instructed them; and post-liminal rites reintegrated them into society in their new statuses (van Gennep 1960:21). As with many Bantu communities, physical circumcision, 'the cut', marked definitive separation from childhood for the Kikuyu. As candidates healed in ritual isolation, threshold guardians facilitated instruction and other liminal processes, preparing graduates for reintegration in their new status. *Riika* age-set cohorts were established when adolescents within defined age brackets went through circumcision together.

There were other childhood rites prior to circumcision, such as rebirth and earlobe piercing to ritually welcome them into their clans. Circumcision was, however, the most important of all rites and the key point of emergence (*kiumĩri*) into being 'whole, complete persons' (Ndereba 2021:46). Over the following decades, men were initiated into tiered levels of elderhood that conferred commensurate leadership and veneration. The rites involved offering designated numbers of goats for ceremonial feasts with councils of elders (*mbũri cia kĩama*) (Waweru 2011:40–47). Senior members of the *mbũri igĩrĩ* (two-goats) council of elders discerned the timing for all transitional rites including adolescent initiation (Kenyatta 1962:105). (This is one cause for the current debate as the church does not call on such councils to determine the

ritual's timing.) Women too had systems of *riika* seniority after adolescent rites, often linked to their children's age-levels and husbands' statuses.

> Thus, in every generation, Gīkūyū tribal organization [was] stabilized by the activities of the various age-grades of old and young people who act[ed] harmoniously in the political, social, religious and economic life of the Gīkūyū. (Kenyatta 1962:3)

Full public status was therefore defined by relationships within the extended family, alongside primal age-set kinship. This was the worldview Western missionaries and colonial partners found as they started work among the Kikuyu at the turn of the twentieth century.

Contextualising the Gospel

Communicating the good news of the redemptive work of God has always required contextualising it for relevance to those receiving it. As Abraham waited for his promised offspring in the Genesis narrative, God descended to confirm the covenant by passing between the halves of animal carcasses he instructed Abraham to prepare (Genesis 15:9–21). This symbolism must have been clearly understood by Abraham in his religio-cultural context (Begg 1988; Hasel 1981; Walton and Keener 2016:42–43). Centuries later, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God on the cultural canvas of Jewish law and traditions (Matthew 5:21–48), clarifying that he did not come to delete the law but to fulfil it (Matthew 5:17–20). After Christ's ascension, the apostles wrestled to contextualise the gospel to surrounding cultures without requiring Jewish circumcision (Acts 10, 15).

Darrell Whiteman traces use of the term *contextualisation* to the early 1970s, describing the task of communicating the gospel to make sense for people in their local cultural context

> in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture. (1997:2)

Done well, contextualisation allows transformation by the redemptive work of God while honouring cultural identity. Citing Revelation 7:9–10, missiologist Scott Moreau conceptualises universal and local poles of contextualisation 'in continual dialogue' (2018:2). Worshippers in this text wear white robes representing the universal pole of the gospel that unifies them as those washed by the blood of the lamb (Revelation 7:13–14). The local pole is the local cultural uniqueness of 'every nation, tribe, people and language', which is evidently not obliterated by unity in Christ or by his return (Revelation 7:9).

Stephen Bevans offers a useful model of how Christians have historically contextualised faith across cultures (1985). His model conceptualises a continuum spanning two philosophical poles: the translational and the anthropological. The translational model conceptualises a culturally 'naked' (Bevans 1985: 191), never-changing, inspired word of God transmitted to assumed theologically deficient, *tabula rasa* local contexts. It however (often inadvertently) conflates the missionary's own culture with an idealised '*supra-cultural*' (Bevans 1985: 190) starting point from which the inspired gospel is masticated and communicated. The synthetic model is closer to the centre of the continuum, and begins to acknowledge distinct sending and receiving cultures, placing them in conversation or synthesis over a neutral gospel. It is however inevitably captive to power imbalances between any two cultures engaging the synthesis. Praxis and transcendental models favour recipient cultures. The praxis model assesses and responds to contextual and social realities, illuminated by scripture. It then reflects on the outcome of its action and responds to it back and forth in adaptive cycles. The transcendental model is often considered subjective as it focuses on an individual's culturally-translated experiences as transcendent encounters with the Holy Spirit. Finally, the anthropological model sees culture as the theatre of God's revelation. Moreau explains, 'The initiation point for contextualisation is not an unchanging message but ever-changing [cultural] settings' (2012:39).

Missionary Non-Contextualisation

Western missionary activity in the in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries communicated a gospel that was captive to their own cultures. Their *modus operandi* fits Bevans' translation model where the 'supra-cultural' gospel was

a *theologia perennis* conceived in the West. Paul Hiebert attributes these hegemonic tendencies to an exceptionalist historical zeitgeist. By the end of the nineteenth century, Western science and technology 'had conquered the world' and was making 'giant strides in conquering nature' (Hiebert 1987:105). Colonialism was in full stride, demonstrating

> the superiority of Western civilization, evolutionism legitimized this in terms of history, and science and Christianity provided the intellectual foundations on which the whole was built. (Hiebert 1987:105)

Local cultures that missionaries encountered were dismissed as pagan and primitive, in need of conversion and assimilation. To many missionaries of the time, evangelism was equivalent to saving natives from their 'demonic cultures' of origin.

By 1910, as many as five missionary societies worked among the Kikuyu people in central Kenya (Githieya 1997:27). Kenyatta writes, 'As far as religion was concerned the African was regarded as a clean slate on which anything could be written' (1962:259). New Christians were taught to follow Christ as a personal choice, contrary to traditional collective decision- and identity-making. Nevertheless, missionaries drew a healthy following, often attracting the downtrodden who came to seek shelter from poverty, incidental misfortunes, and ancestral land displacement, and to seek treatment for ailments and infirmities. They often prospered due to the trappings of missionary patronage, upending the social order which now privileged them over their kin.

Many converts however still wrestled with having to discard deeply ingrained worldviews that seamlessly integrated *ubuntu* spirituality into all aspects of daily life. Conflicts were inevitable, and they soon arose on several fronts. Missionaries were irked by many Kikuyu rituals, but none as much as female circumcision. Africans protested subjugation and the often-involuntary loss of traditional land to missionaries and colonial authorities whom they perceived as one and the same (Galgalo 2012:13). Political organisations soon sprouted, led by an emerging class of educated locals who gave voice to grievances over land and taxation. Among them was the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA),

which by 1924 had broadened its agenda to include missionary opposition to female circumcision (Murray 1973:202). KCA leaders formally accused missionaries of waging war on Kikuyu identity and cultural practices, aligning the interests of traditionalists and large portions of Kikuyu Christian converts alike (wa Kangethe 1981:265).

In response, three missionary societies called a crisis meeting and, in late 1924, crafted 'The Thogoto Declaration' (wa Kangethe 1981:270). It required African church members to sign a resolution dissociating themselves from female circumcision or risk excommunication. Acquiescing Kikuyus who could not write used thumbprints to affirm the declaration, earning the moniker *kĩroore* Christians. A significant number of converts however refused to sign it and called themselves *karĩng'a* (steadfast) for their attachment to cultural traditions and practices. A critical turning point of resistance came with the '*Mũthĩrĩgũ*' crisis of 1929 (wa Kangethe 1981:271). *Mũthĩrĩgũ* was a call-and-response protest song that gleefully mocked uncircumcised women, their *kĩroore* families, anti-clitoridectomy missionaries, and colonial authorities alike. Energised by agile youth, the song gained wide notoriety and was eventually banned by the colonial governor in 1930, who blamed it for violent incidents (Githieya 1997:88).

Indigenous Church Movements

Swathes of *karĩng'a* converts responded by leaving protestant missionary churches. A rising number of their leaders could now read the recently translated Kikuyu Bible for themselves and joined a growing agitation for self-determination. They formed African independent schools and churches where they could express their faith in culture more freely (Githieya 1997:93–94). Their efforts were catalysed by South African Orthodox Church archbishop William D. Alexander, who helped them establish their own seminary in 1935, and the Kenya African Teachers College (KATC) in 1939 (wa Kangethe 1988:38–40). *Karĩng'a* adopted missionary hymns and prayer books, while contextualising traditional practices of praying with hands raised and eyes open facing Mount Kenya (wa Kangethe 1988:38–39). Colonial and missionary authorities eventually banned the movement using emergency laws, alarmed by its rapid growth to over two hundred *Karĩng'a* schools all over Kenya and

Tanzania by 1952. Though African independent churches have since then experienced chequered fortunes, 'they were an early example of Africans' appropriation of the Christian faith as their own' (Mugambi 2020:53). As such, they were the genesis of current conversations on traditionalism and Christian faith.

Meanwhile, *kĩroore* adherents remained in mainline churches, with many benefitting from missionary patronage. Some rose to positions of authority as colonial chiefs and councilmen, pastors and church leaders, with others even collaborating in colonial suppression of the nationalist struggle (wa Kangethe 1988:41). The majority were however swept up by the East African Revival movement which from the 1930s revolutionised African Christianity beyond sects and ethnic identities.

East African Revival

The origins of the East African Revival (EAR) are associated with Anglican doctor Joe Church who in the 1920s was sent by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) base in Uganda to launch a station in Gahini, Rwanda. He invited his Ugandan friend Simeoni Nsibambi to recruit young, zealous hospital workers and educators he had mentored in Kampala (Ward 2012:3). Revival broke out when these indigenous Christians went out to surrounding villages preaching brokenness, confession of sin, forgiveness, and thanksgiving. Their message soon attracted thousands of Africans and quickly spread. Dr Church, who never claimed to be the EAR leader, scaffolded the movement with his organisational skills and extensive social capital in the East African colonial milieu, enabling these youthful African evangelists to travel and preach (Ward 2012:3–4). The movement soon breached territorial boundaries as Revivalists emerged as an ecumenical subculture with a strongly pietistic identity among mainline denominations. In March 1937, Dr Church helped organise the first Revival convention in Kabete on the outskirts of a fast-growing Nairobi City. The movement soon expanded all over Kenya including among Kikuyu Christians (Hoehler-Fatton 2012:73).

Revivalist contextualisation of the gospel would roughly fit Bevans' synthetic model. Its

> genius lay in its ability to create a synthesis of biblical teachings and indigenous cultural and religious practices that was uniquely its own. (Karanja 2012:143)

They sought a counter-cultural biblical identity that held in tension Western values such as 'the nuclear family, […] clean and tidy houses, [and] schooling for their children' and 'a purified form of traditional community' (Ward 2012:5). At the same time, they were ambivalent to elements of both cultures, resisting the compromises of mainline protestant churches with their hierarchies and colonial overtones, as well as 'traditional spirituality and idolatrous practices of the old religion' (Ward 2012:5). The result was a new clan that recreated old communitarian values in a new form of piety, one that demanded decisive transformation. As the decades ushered political and social change, Revivalists resisted nationalist and tribal politics, often at great personal risk. Kikuyu brethren distanced themselves from blood oathing during Kenya's *Mau Mau* independence struggle, and later during the post-colonial ethnic allegiance demanded by the young nation's president Kenyatta in 1969 (Gatu 2012:39).

Some missionary-educated Revivalists eventually pioneered African leadership in mainline denominational churches. Rev. John Gatũ became the first African general secretary of the Presbyterian Church in East Africa (PCEA). Gatũ became internationally renowned when in 1971, speaking at an evangelical conference in Wisconsin, USA, he issued the clarion call for a five-year moratorium from Western missionary activity and funding in developing countries, to create space for autonomy in the indigenous leadership (Wagner 1975:166). Gatũ's call was widely misconstrued as isolationism and anti-evangelism (Larsen 2022:231; Wagner 1975:168). This reflected the very mindset he was confronting: that Western funding and supervision of local leaders were indispensable for legitimate 'Third World' ministry. By resisting hierarchies separating Western and indigenous leadership authority in the denominations, Gatũ championed a global, ecumenical, post-colonial activism.

Gatũ's contextualisation straddled Bevans' synthetic and praxis models as he wrestled with the questions, 'What does it mean to inhabit a truly African Christianity? What form should Christianity take in a particular African culture?' (Larsen 2022:240). Acting on his call to pause Western funding, he

demonstrated success within his denomination by initiating 'Jitegemee' (self-sufficiency) projects which became a model for churches in the developing world. He led his church towards adopting African forms of worship and, as a prolific Kikuyu poet, wrote hymns that were incorporated into the hymnal. Gatũ was one of the first mainline denominational leaders to propose contemporary church-led adolescent rites of passage (Larsen 2022:243).

Kenyan Churches in Liminality

Gatũ was among a generation of parents and leaders who, in a newly independent Kenya, embraced its stated priorities to combat poverty, illiteracy, and disease, and sought the best lives and education they could afford for their children (Oranga, Obuba, and Nyakundi 2020:411). While many adopted Western lifestyles in the heady post-colonial optimism, Revivalists generally retained the movement's strict legalism and resisted the trappings of Western fashion and excess consumerism in their homes. Their *uhuru* (post-independence) children, however, found this strictness alienating from the emerging youth culture they encountered at their schools. This led to a generational waning – but not death – of the Revival movement into the 1980s. Some adolescents completely rebelled against their families' faith, especially while in high school.[1] Others, however, found spiritual belonging in student movements such as the Kenya Students Christian Fellowship (KSCF) at their schools (Mugambi 2020:75).

A renewed task for post-independence Kenyans was to navigate the tension between their communal ethnic cultural heritage and assumptions that Western education, white collar jobs, and nuclear family structures would lead to prosperity. The school curriculum was becoming Africanised, and students now read Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and Okot p'Bitek, alongside Shakespeare and Dickens. Young people danced to Congolese Lingala and adopted African American soul and hip hop. They were shaped by an increasingly global youth culture and drawn to the rising Afrocentricity of the 1970s and 1980s (Asante 2021). Many were not shackled by direct experiences

[1] This was my personal experience. My parents became Revivalists in the 1950s. I unfortunately rebelled against their strict faith and lifestyle requirements while in a boarding high school.

with the darker elements of traditional ethnic practices as they explored their African identities. The country was in liminal post-independence reimagination, and its youth vacillated between Western and African identities, proud to be African but strongly embracing Westernised lifestyles. By the 1990s this *uhuru* generation, many of them now old enough to start their own families, were domiciled in three broad categories of reformed Kenyan churches: mainline denominations, newer Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, and progressive Pentecostal churches (Gitau 2018; Mugambi 2020).

Mainline denominational churches retained echoes of missionary ecclesiology and enjoyed Western financial patronage. They were initially dominated by older generations of conservative Revivalists. Affiliations with traditional denominational networks such as the Anglican Lambeth Conference continued until controversies over sexual identity forced a fork in the road at the turn of the twenty-first century. African churches aligned with a conservative biblical interpretation of sexuality and joined movements such as the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON Global Anglicans 2024). They rejected what they perceived as capitulation to liberal cultural thought by their Western brethren.

They however went beyond earlier EAR non-political involvement when their leaders began to confront the rampant corruption and political excesses of government, especially during Daniel Arap Moi's presidency. Activist clergymen emerged, fighting sociopolitical ills with prophetic voices from their pulpits, grounding their praxis in an evangelical understanding of biblical justice. They included Presbyterians John Gatũ and Timothy Njoya, and Anglican bishops Alexander Muge, David Gitari, and Peter Njenga, all self-proclaimed Revivalists. Some youth remained in these denominations, drawn by the charisma of these leaders and by emerging youth programming within their churches. Influenced by student movements at their schools, they brought a Pentecostal fervour that might have irked earlier Revivalists.

A second stripe of churches are categorised by Mugambi (2020:90) as 'Newer Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (NPCCs)'. These emerged from movements such as the Kenya Student Christian Fellowship (KSCF) and youth-focused church leaders seeking to address the gap created by Revivalists' radical conservatism. Denominations such as Deliverance Church (Wasamu 2024) and Nairobi Pentecostal Church (now Christ Is The Answer Ministries) attracted

droves of young people from the early 1970s. They eventually spread into lower income neighbourhoods in cities, peri-urban and rural areas, spawning a plethora of independent churches often planted by a 'big man or woman of the big God' persona (Gitau 2018:36). Heavily influenced by Western television evangelists, they drew large crowds of mostly younger, energetic congregants to open-air 'miracle crusades'. They contextualised the gospel somewhere between Bevans' praxis and transcendental models, audaciously proclaiming God's abundant blessings upon their audiences' current circumstances, while rather subjectively declaring the Holy Spirit's actions. Like their denominational parents, they retained Revivalists' focus on personal salvation and repeated testimonies of transformation. Older denominational adherents tended to consider these churches as rootless and opportunistic, and their glossolalia as raucous and chaotic (Mugambi 2020:79–80).

A third stripe of churches has been named Progressive Pentecostal Churches (PPC) (Mugambi 2020:131–160). These appeal to highly educated urbanites who were also influenced by charismatic student organisations and now form the middle to upper socioeconomic strata of society. Many of them grew up connected to the denominational traditions of their parents and maintain strong, nostalgic links. Mugambi posits that a distinction of PPCs is that they went beyond the personal transformation rooted in Revivalists and NPCCs, and the political activism of mainline denominational clergy, to embrace a more comprehensive, holistic societal transformation. Progressive Pentecostal Churches' contextualisation praxis engages their generally younger, more globally exposed congregants in matters of economic, political, family, local, and international missions, leadership development, and church planting. They apply market research and state of the art technology to understand emerging contemporary culture. Their denominations include the Nairobi Baptist Church, Parklands Baptist Church, Nairobi Pentecostal Church, Nairobi Chapel, and International Christian Centre (ICC).

These three stripes of church would be considered evangelical in Western ecclesiology as they bear Bebbington's (1989) quadrilateral characteristics: centrality of the Bible, the cross, conversion, and activism. Their Pentecostal bent expresses a holistic African spirituality with strong relationality and orality. The Holy Spirit permeates all aspects of life, including socio-political concerns. Their diverse contextualisation blend is a quest for self-ascribed

identity as African Christians living in a postcolonial, multiethnic, globally connected milieu. In this liminal state, they are willing to experiment with elements of traditional cultures of origin. They explore authenticity in worship, music, and dance rhythms and wear colourful contemporised African outfits to church.

Contextualising Rites of Passage

It was into this diverse ecclesial context that institutionalised expressions of church-based rites of passage emerged in the last three decades (Karianjahi 2024:107–108). Parents were alarmed by the evident discontinuity of kinship values and the risky, pseudo-adulthood rituals they saw emerging among their young in the absence of traditional rites (Githiga 2009; Meade 1996). Families responded to this loss of community guidance in different ways. Some chose to circumcise their sons postnatally at hospitals, altogether decoupling it from adolescent transitions. Others gathered extended kin and likeminded friends to facilitate 'the cut' when their boys came of age. Transitions for girls remained vague because clitoridectomy was definitively illegal (National Council for Law Reporting 2012) and widely considered part of a dark past. Churches rising to address this lacuna with programming for both boys and girls found eager congregants and even drew unchurched families.[2]

Gatũ was an early proponent of such church-led adolescent programmes. Later, Rev. Wilfred Kogo created a Presbyterian adolescent rites programme 'as an avenue to fight alcohol and drug abuse, and other forms of indiscipline through mentorship' (Njoraa 2022:4). Anglican bishop Timothy Ranji personally led large adolescent rites camps in his Mount Kenya South diocese in the early 2000s (Karianjahi 2024:104–105). Heavily influenced by their Revivalist roots, these Kikuyu men of the cloth attributed youthful moral decline to Western influence and were confident of the efficacy of intergenerational connectedness inherent in communal rites of passage. They were however resistant to the spiritual and sexual tenor of traditional *mambura* rituals, which Kenyatta described as 'divine services' (1962:129; see also Bernardi 1993).

[2] My parents organised such an event for me alongside five other boys from neighbourhood Revivalist families as we transitioned from primary school to high school in the late 1970s.

Their resultant synthesis was the redemptive dialogue between African culture and Christian faith championed by Gatũ.

In November 1997, I led six boys from my youth group at the Nairobi Chapel, a Progressive Pentecostal Church (Mugambi 2020:255), on a weeklong transitional camp to explore how they might successfully transition into high school. This initiative eventually led to the 2002 formation of Tanari Trust, a non-profit organisation overseen by five non-denominational PPC churches. Tanari Trust has since made its flagship Rites of Passage Experiences (ROPES) (Tanari Trust 2026) programmes available to over one hundred churches and youth-focused institutions by training facilitators and offering follow-up support. The ROPES programme has been the subject of some academic interest (Moreau 2018:170; Ndereba 2021:51). In addition to these church-led initiatives, Christian faculty from public universities in Nairobi and Uasin Gishu counties independently started transitional programmes for their local communities, compelled by their research endeavours (Karianjahi 2024). These efforts by PPCs and scholars reflects a spontaneous contextualisation praxis that exemplifies

> discerning, through analysis, where God is acting, and then attempting through reflective action, to act in that same situation as God's partner. (Bevans 1985:192)

To foster purposeful reflection and dialogue, scholars from Moi University in Uasin Gichu County organised a 'National Initiation Rites Conference' in 2017 through their African Christian Initiation Programme (ACIP), gathering an eclectic group of Christian adolescent rites practitioners.

Renaissance Traditionalist Efforts

Meanwhile, a resurgence of traditionalist rites occurred among sections of Kikuyu men in the early 2000s. It was a gilded renaissance of traditional kinship identity replete with age-grade graduation mediated by self-ascribed *mbũri*

(age graduation goats) offered to elders.[3] Some renaissance champions chafed at church-based rites of passage which they considered capitulation to Western cultural hegemony and a usurping of the prerogative of Kikuyu elders to impute societal wisdom (Mũkũyũ 2018). Anglican bishop Francis Omondi attributes the new wave of ethnic reawakening across the country to political expediency. In the 1980s, he recalls, President Moi banned ethnic organisations which he considered a threat to his leadership, especially among the numerically dominant Kikuyu (Omondi 2023). After Moi left office in 2002, Omondi continues, newfound freedom germinated vernacular media whose wide reach fuelled ethnic awareness and political alignments. When widespread inter-ethnic, post-election violence erupted in January 2008, Kikuyus felt vulnerable after violent land evictions, especially in the Rift Valley. An emergent *Kĩama kĩa Athuri a Ma* (*Kĩama*) Kikuyu council gained recognition for brokering peace by successfully engaging elders from other ethnic groups. The promulgation of a new 2010 Kenyan constitution cemented the rights of ethnic organisations (National Council for Law Reporting 2010).

A new generation of Kikuyu men embraced this cultural renaissance and refreshed the traditional ritual of offering requisite *mbũri cia kĩama* (initiation goats) to attain elderhood. A study by Anglican Diocese of Mount Kenya South (DMKS) scholars describes how adherents include some Christian leaders and professionals – doctors, lawyers, politicians, businessmen, pastors, and priests (Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021). They

> attend Church service in the morning, partake [of] the Holy Communion and in the afternoon attend *Kiama kia Athuri kia ma* and equally participate in its rituals and ceremonies

they wrote (Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:655). It is this anthropological contextualisation of faith, vaguely reminiscent of the days of Arathi and Karĩng'a, that has stirred vigorous discourse within the church. A

[3] I use the terms 'renaissance' and 'renaissance traditionalists' as metaphors for those who repudiate an immediate past during which 'pure' African or Kikuyu culture was corrupted by Western hegemony. My use of the metaphor fails to account for the complexities of cultural continuity, just as the term is inadequate in its classical conception of three 'gilded' European historical periods.

majority of the DMKS study respondents, for instance, indicated that *kĩama* promotes much needed societal values 'such as respect, morality, men responsibilities [*sic*] and integrity [that] are genuine concerns in the society, [and] are lacking today' (Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:670). Apropos, retired DMKS bishop Peter Njenga narrates how he introduced a rule for his synod after gross lack of confidentiality within diocesan leadership. 'I directed that nobody would be elected unless they produced a mbuzi (goat) to the Kĩama' (Njenga 2023:321). He argues that the gravitas of traditional *kĩama* elderhood would instil 'that deeply engrained understanding of […] commitments' implanted by culture.

Other Christians object to this *kĩama* renaissance, arguing that such ethnic movements propagate exclusion and political divisions in the church.

> The church stands to be destroyed not with the blood of the slaughtered goats of *Kĩama* ceremonies, but with the logic of tribal politics that conditions us to act […] without a commitment to the nation's common good

writes Omondi (2023). Theologically, some see the mixing of faith with *kĩama* as syncretic. This was exemplified by the immediate discontinuation of Njenga's *kĩama* requirement by his DMKS prelate successor, Timothy Ranji (Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:661; Njenga 2023:322). Butchering goats to initiate *athuri* elders is seen as the veneration of ancestors 'who will guide the initiate into the future as a leader' (Kamau, Katola, and Waweru 2024:55). Praying with eyes open and arms raised towards *Kĩrĩnyaga* (Mount Kenya) and dripping the blood of *kĩama* goats into the soil alongside splashes of traditional, cow-horn-served *mũratina* brew is considered offering libations 'to call upon the participation of the departed as witnesses' (Kamau, Katola, and Waweru 2024:55). St. Paul's University faculty member Kevin Ndereba (2021:48) writes,

> 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.

Clearly, the argument continues, this is contrary to faith in the adequacy of the blood of Christ for all spiritual and physical needs.

> Kikuyu Christians are sacrificing goats when they feel the challenge they are facing cannot be overcome through prayers and the blood of Christ

write Kenyatta University scholars (Kamau, Katola, and Waweru 2024:55). Revivalist John Ng'ang'a concludes,

> The consequences of mixing traditions in Christianity are tragic. If you blend your faith with cultural practices, you will never truly experience the freedom that comes from being in Christ. (2023:184)

This tension is explained by the St. Paul's University scholars:

> it clearly came up that *kiama* are using cultural hermeneutics while Christians [uncomfortable with the practices] are using biblical hermeneutics. Cultural hermeneutics means that one understands and uses the culture to interpret the scripture. Biblical hermeneutics […] uses the scriptures to interpret the culture, [and] scripture takes the imminence [*sic*]. These are two parallels with no point of convergent [*sic*]. (Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:668)

A cultural hermeneutic (closest to Bevans' anthropological contextualisation) is considered syncretistic while a biblical hermeneutic (closest to translational contextualisation) is seen as supra-cultural, with the two seen as antithetical binaries.

Liminal Antistructure as Syncretism

Syncretism is often defined as the mixing of Christian and traditional beliefs and practices in ways that undermine the gospel (Ndereba 2021; Ng'ang'a 2023). Recent scholarship, however, challenges this narrow definition. Michael Green tracks the term to its first-century Plutarchan Greek usage, where it

meant the unifying of feuding parties to meet a particular common good (2024:208). Over time, the term lost favour, leading to its nineteenth- and twentieth-century missionary appropriation to condemn cultural expressions of worship emerging from non-Western contexts (Green 2024:202). Green argues that the term can and should carry both positive and negative meanings. Whereas there are indeed syncretic practices that water down the gospel, the dominant use of the term often ignores transitional journeys of whole persons and cultures towards following Christ. Green opposes assumptions that only certain cultures can reflect the transcendent, omnipresent, trinitarian *imago Dei*. 'Instead,' he writes,

> we come to a liminal space in which […] we see God revealing himself and Christ's image through a kaleidoscope not only of different ethnic groups but also of their epistemologies, cosmologies, and ontologies. (2024:221)

Half a century after Arnold van Gennep's aforementioned seminal text describing the threefold stages of rites of passage (1960), anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) focused on the liminal, in-between stage of transitions. Turner described the three stages as 'dialectical processes' of structure, antistructure, and restructuring that are the very fabric of individual and cohort rites (1969:97). Transitional antistructure is that liminal in-between stage during which old norms are shed as new ones are explored and considered (Turner 1979:234). Liminality is characterised by ambiguity, exploration, and renegotiation with elements of both the old and the new interacting in dynamic tension. 'Liminal entities,' Turner writes,

> are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (1969:95)

A society in transition similarly goes through inter-structural states, sometimes testing the new with the familiar old as it communally explores and considers what it should become. The Israelites were in such antistructure as they journeyed forty years from structural slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12–13) and arrived as not-yet-fully-formed God's people into the promised land (Joshua 3). The adventures of those liminal years involved sometimes defaulting to what

they were familiar with and testing it against what they were learning through laws, rituals, and ceremonies. They sometimes experienced God's displeasure in their exploits (Exodus 32) but it was always accompanied by his mercy that endures forever (Exodus 33).

Transitioning from traditional African worldviews into an authentic African Christian identity similarly includes an exploration of the good news in ways that sometimes present as liminal syncretism. I propose that some transitional Old Testament examples, of the patriarchs (see Genesis 31:10–20), of Israelites in the wilderness (Numbers 21:4–9), and of gentiles joining the New Testament church (Acts 10, 15), were similar forms of liminal syncretism. These were pilgrims in formational antistructure contextualising the incarnational gospel of Jesus Christ as whole, cultural, and material persons. Defending his people's gospel contextualisation practices, Native American theologian Richard Twiss writes,

> a transitional process of syncretism is a normal part of our spiritual growth – yes, normal! It might even be thought of as 'transitional' syncretism or a syncretistic process of transformation. (2015:31)

He proposes that, as people are transformed by the gospel, they might

> move in and out of syncretism as they embrace, reject, modify, learn and grow toward spiritual maturity as sociocultural persons following Jesus. (Twiss 2015:31)

Might the conversation on contemporary rites of passage be evidence of a people in religio-cultural liminal antistructure negotiating how to be authentic African disciples of Jesus Christ in a rapidly changing world? Anglican bishop Joseph Galgalo encourages such discourse, and calls it a conversational model. 'Christianity,' he writes, 'is necessarily dynamic in that the Gospel usually finds a cultural re-expression in every new context and historical setting' (2012:99). When viewed through the dynamic lens of liminal antistructure, a conversational approach offers a hospitable posture for

> interpreting scriptures with (not for) the Christians who read and understand scriptures in their own ways as informed by their particular cultural setting and situations in life. (Galgalo 2012:101)

It becomes less about accusations of syncretism by one side and of capitulation to the West by another. Rather, a conversation sets guardrails against excesses, enhancing healthy unity in diversity (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). Contemporary designers of adolescent rites of passage from different convictions in Kenya have this in common: a desire to influence the holistic formation of an outsized demographic of restless and globally connected youth in rapidly changing times. Christian practitioners yearn for an authentic African faith, unshackled from outdated Western ontological assumptions. How they contextualise that faith is key to this quest.

Conclusion

Earnestly pursuing an authentic African faith is akin to navigating a metaphorical cultural-identity moratorium (Marcia 1966) due to the uncertainties of liminal antistructure. The starting point for such a moratorium is complex for most Kenyans, who were born into a context that was already in identity flux. The erosion of their ancestral spirituality was triggered by a missionary-colonial architecture a century ago and subsequently corroded by the transitional currents of an emerging, multiethnic, globally connected nation. Rising Afrocentricity (Asante 2014) since independence led Kenyans to question Western cultural norms previously assumed to be supra-cultural, and to desire authenticity as African Christians. The liminal task of contextualising this faith includes exploring and incorporating elements from their cultural traditions that reflect the *imago Dei*. Moreover, they want to discern the universal or normative elements (Moreau 2018:3) of faith through theological lenses that account for contextual realities (Orobator 2015:6). Emmanuel Katongole writes,

> Christian identity is not a ‘static’ essence, spiritual or otherwise, but an invitation to a journey, with a definite direction and telos. (2023:63)

That *telos* is an eschatological aspiration to be achieved when all cultures, alongside heavenly hosts, worship the Lord in perfect harmony when he returns (Revelation 7:9–12). Meanwhile, we remain a pilgrim people 'looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (Hebrews 11:10).

The extended liminal state of the Kenyan ecumenical landscape comes with the untidy uncertainty of liminal antistructure. I have proposed that the debate over contemporary rites of passage exemplified by the Kikuyu of central Kenya is symptomatic of this uncertainty. Honouring God as a pilgrim people calls for leveraging commonalities that strengthen unity (Ephesians 4:2–6), in humble tension with inevitable differences on how to recover this cultural gem. The felt need to creatively minister to a youth-heavy population is one such commonality. Another is the desire for a decolonial African faith (Green 2024:203) that meets Kenyans where they are as twenty-first-century contemporary cultural beings. Above all, the foundational cement of love (Galatians 5:14) must superintend the enterprise of humbly listening to and caring for one another with the attitude of Christ (Philippians 2:3–5).

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