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‘Kĩama Kia Athuri’ Rituals, and Challenges to Agikuyu Christians

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Abstract

This study examined the Agĩkũyũ *Kĩama kia athuri*'s (council of elders) initiation rituals to establish whether they are religious acts of worship and therefore undermine Christianity, as has been claimed by Agĩkũyũ church leaders. To analyse the *Kĩama* (council) movement, this research applied four steps and used criteria advanced by Arnold van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* and Victor Turner's 'Rituals' to evaluate the *Kĩama*'s ceremonies. On the question of sacrifices and offerings, the research revealed that the shedding of animal blood was not unique to the *Kĩama* ceremonies but occurred without question in other events in the Agĩkũyũ lives, like in marriage. The study determined that the rituals were rites of passage for the Agĩkũyũ men into varying degrees of eldership. It established a yearning to return to the Agĩkũyũ customs disrupted by colonialism and the coming of Christianity. This study identified political rather than religious motifs in the resurgence of the *Kĩama kia athuri*, purporting to protect Agĩkũyũ's political and economic interests. But this would undermine Christianity as well.

Introduction

The global resurgence of African cultural practices has attracted a sizeable number of African scholars' attention. This couples with the dilemma facing African Christians in their choice of affiliation between Christian or modern and traditional values.

The rate at which the Agĩkũyũ Christians are reverting to their traditional cultural practices such as the *Kĩama kia athuri* (council of elders, or Agĩkũyũ council of elders) has prompted several studies to gain an in-depth understanding of the movement and inform the church's response. Among the Agĩkũyũ, *Kĩama* (council) was the highest communal authority vested in the legislative, executive, and judicial functions (Diocese of Mount Kenya South 2018:1). Its members were the custodians of Agĩkũyũ ancestral land, governance, military, customs, and religious matters. The *Kĩama* was in charge of the religious, economic, political, and social order of the Agĩkũyũ people. In modern times this term, *Kĩama kia athuri*, suggests Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:644), was adopted following the 2008 post-election violence. It was after the *Kĩama* eldership brokered peace with elders of other ethnic groups in the Rift Valley. The post-election violence of 2007/08 affected the political and economic lives of the Agĩkũyũs living in the Rift Valley. Hence, Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:645) note that Agĩkũyũ elders sought protection from further eviction.

It is difficult to ignore the impetus among Africans to adopt Africa's worldview in their practical lives as Christians, hence theologians, such as Ndereba (2021:55), have urged African theologians to pay close attention to the African traditional worldview and cultural practices for relevant lessons. But other scholars and Agĩkũyũ Christians dismiss the *Kĩama* as having no place in the modern civilised world. They refuse to accommodate the *Kĩama* in Christianity for the risk of syncretism. S. N. Ndung'u, E. Onyango, and S. Githuku (2021:671) observed that the main contention Christian theologians hold against *Kĩama* was in its initiation rituals, the 'aspects of sacrifices (blood), praying facing Kirinyaga and libations'. These Christians consider *Kĩama* rituals repulsive, hence rejecting the movement. How shall the Agĩkũyũ Christians reconcile their cultural practices and Christian liturgy?

Study Problem

This study examines the validity of categorising *Kĩama's* initiation rituals as religious and, therefore, incompatible with Christian teachings.

Methodology

The study approaches the study in four steps. In the first step, the study describes how *Kĩama* manifests in the present Agĩkũyũ society. The second step discusses why *Kĩama* endures and its significance in the Agĩkũyũ community, whereas the third uses anthropologists' theories to interpret the implications of *Kĩama's* sacrificial rituals. The final step weighs, as a response, the appropriateness of *Kĩama* for Christians today.

***Kĩama* kia Athuri manifests among the Agĩkũyũ today**

Over the last twenty years, scholars noted a revival of Agĩkũyũ cultural groups such as *Thai*, *Kĩama kia Athuri*, *Ngwata Ndai*, and *Mungiki*, among others. These cultural groups sought to restore the Agĩkũyũ cultural practices which they jettisoned in the post-colonial era. During the 1980s, as was the colonial era, President Moi's government outlawed tribal groupings, but targeted the Agĩkũyũ groups. Police often arrested these practitioners, according to Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:661),

'in the forest carrying out the initiation [...] locked them in a cell together with the meat they were roasting'. However, there has been a new impetus in forming these ethnic groups after 2002.

After the ethnic clashes of 2008, there was an unprecedented cultural awakening in the country, attributed to a mixture of factors. One was the increased reach of the vernacular media, which became a medium for messaging ethnic sentiments (Diocese of Mount Kenya South 2018:7). The second was the ethnic political participation through the formation of ethnic-based political parties. The third is the drive to preserve ethnic and cultural practices, and the fourth is the promulgation of the 2010 Kenyan constitution. The constitution of 2010 buttressed cultural heritages in law,¹ allowing for their overt operations, hence registration in 2014 of the Kikuyu Council of Elders Association Trust (KCEAT) and in 2018 the Agikuyu Council of Elders (GCE).

¹ The Kenyan constitution promulgated in 2010, Chapter 2: Section 11, (1) and (2) encourages cultural practices that are consistent with the natural law.

Of late, proponents of the *Kĩama* have initiated Agĩkũyũ men in droves. Initiates include church leaders, convinced that the association has a vital role in their society. As a governing council of elders, it focuses on public governance issues of the day, as claimed by 60% of respondents in the study by Ndung’u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:656). It provides a mentorship framework for men in society, while 35% of the participants in Ndung’u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:662) found a uniting factor of *Kĩama*, which minimises vices among men.

The council draws its members from all walks of life. They established cohorts of the organisation throughout the country (Diocese of Mount Kenya South 2018:8). But most *Kĩama* adherents are Christians (Ndung’u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:655). They attend church service in the morning, partake of Holy Communion, and in the afternoon, they attend *Kĩama* and participate in its rituals and ceremonies (Ndung’u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:644). Bishop Peter Njenga of the Anglican Church Diocese of Mt Kenya South was not only a *Kĩama* member but recruited Christian men of his diocese into it. He writes (Njenga 2023:321),

I introduced a new rule through the synod. I directed that nobody would be elected unless they produced a *mbuzi* (goat) to the Kiama (council).

Some hold offices from the local church to the diocesan synod of Mount Kenya South Diocese. Serving with Bishop Njenga, *Kĩama* members contributed 98% of the materials and money needed to build churches or church developments. They contributed more than those who profess salvation. This, Kambo (in Ndung’u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:656) observes,

Kĩama membership comprises 80% of Christians of different denominations and faiths who hold leadership positions in their Churches ‘including professionals such as doctors, lawyers, politicians, business owners, pastors, and priests. *Kĩama* upholds the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and Joshua 24:1-15 ‘Me and my house we will serve the Lord’, the *Kĩama*

demonized by the Anglican Church is not the one I know of as a member. It is good wisdom to criticize what one knows about.²

Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:656) state that 60% of the respondents had prior knowledge of the *Kĩama* initiation rites. But the younger respondents (represented by 10%), learned of the rites during the initiation and the subsequent teachings. In matters of family, morality, respect, and responsibilities, they counselled the recruits regardless of their entrance level. They had to live exemplary lives, following the members' code of conduct, since they were heads of their families. They learned to discuss ethnic and political challenges facing the Agĩkũyũ society, guided by the Kikuyu Council of Elders. In the end, a designated person led the men in prayers facing Mount Kenya, lifting their hands, and invoking God saying: *thai thathaiya Ngai thai* (praises be to God praise).

Although the Diocese of Mt. Kenya South under Bishop Njenga embraced *Kĩama*, his successor Bishop Timothy Ranji differed. Njenga (2023:322) laments,

when my successor came in, he said no to that practice. He moved to the synod and said that giving goats to Kiama was evil and sinful.

Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:670) acknowledge that 'Agikuyu are divided on the relevance and importance of *Kĩama* in the modern society'. Many Christian Agĩkũyũ are living in modernity and church, and as Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:662) noted, they regarded *Kĩama* as irrelevant. They have embraced the transformation and modernity proffered by the new societal structures of governance, making *Kĩama* redundant.

² Kambo's statement in '*Kĩama* circular: 26th July 2016, p. 12' is cited in Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021 without providing a link in their bibliography.

***Kĩama's* Significance in the Agĩkũyũ Community**

In considering the historical development of the *Kĩama kia athuri* in its cultural contexts, this section of the study interprets the reasons underlying the practice.

The Origins of Kĩama

The Agĩkũyũ, according to oral tradition, was a matriarchal society where the ruling women oppressed their male folk (Presbyterian Church of East Africa 2018:6). The men, *riika rĩa Iregi* (*Iregi* age group),³ retreated secretly into the forest to plot their freedom from tyranny. These secret meetings bore the *Kĩama*. Since the meetings took long, they had to eat, hence goats (*mbũri*) were slaughtered. So, men made it a habit of bringing a goat, *mbũri ya Kĩama* (goat for the meeting), to be eaten during the *Kĩama* meetings. Soon goat-eating eclipsed the purpose of the *Kĩama*, the freedom of deliberation.

The Agĩkũyũ legend (Presbyterian Church of East Africa 2018:7) credits the *Iregi* for executing a violent overthrow of the women's regime. They impregnated their wives at the same time and engaged them in a physical fight a month before delivery when they were most vulnerable. The subject of contention is when the coup happened. For, while Agĩkũyũ elders credit it to the *Iregi* age set, Maina wa Kinyatti (2011) claims that the coup occurred after this age set. Despite these discrepancies, the role the *Iregi* played is not in dispute (Presbyterian Church of East Africa 2018:8). They were, thereafter, set to implement the constitution they coined to govern a new patriarchal government. The new constitution proposed that,

a) henceforth men must decline to execute the duties women allocated to them, for example, looking after babies, drawing water, fetching firewood, being governed by women, and being beaten;

³ *Iregi* means 'to protest' or 'to dissent'. This age group was the bunch of men who were circumcised when the conflict overturning matriarchy was at its height.

b) have their separate huts (*thingira*) and stop sleeping in their wives' houses (*nyũmba*);

c) continue meeting in the form of *Kĩama*;⁴ so that they can review their constitution and progress of emancipation;

d) to meet in their '*thingira*' with a view to mentor their sons on manhood, honour, allegiance to the community, and integrity and uphold the new system of governance;

e) declare that animals, children, land, and women themselves are men's properties and that men have exclusive rights over them;

f) men to be paying a dowry to exercise full authority over women;⁵

g) mothers, aunts, and grandmothers are to be giving instructions concerning the new government to all female children in the *nyũmba*, while fathers, uncles, and grandfathers are to be doing the same in the *thingira*;⁶

h) all wives of a certain age group were jointly owned by the age mates;⁷

⁴ Note that the word *kĩama* first meant 'meeting'. Over time this metamorphosed into a secret council. The place of eating goats in these meetings is only a recent emphasis.

⁵ Previously women married and paid the dowry for men.

⁶ So, after weaning, the boy would join others in the '*thingira*' for instructions and mentoring. Circumcision or initiation was a graduation ceremony after the instructions (education).

⁷ The Gĩkũyũ men were organised in age sets. These are people of the same age and were circumcised at the same time. All the women were jointly owned by the age set in order to: i) conceal the infertility of men; ii) avoid rape in case one age mate's wife was sick or pregnant or denied conjugal rights; iii) have children from outside the marriage to propagate the name of the family in case the family were bewitched to

i) all issues of morality, economy, social welfare, leadership, religion, and justice would be adjudicated by the *Kĩama*. (Presbyterian Church of East Africa 2018:8-9)

The *Iregi* became the custodians of the Agĩkũyũ people. For continuity of its social function, it metamorphosed into the *Kĩama kia athuri a mbũri*. Further, it was subdivided into stages whose members they assigned various societal functions. Its members, henceforth, had to pay a goat to advance in the eldership stages. Humphrey Waweru identified five councils of elders joined in stages.

The first of these councils, Waweru (2011:42) holds, was *Kĩama gia Kamatimu* (the spear's council). It was known as *Kĩama gia Mburi Imwe* (the council of the first goat). This is because, one gave a goat, *mburi ya Kĩama* (the council's goat), to belong to this council. This was an age-grade training. The council, comprising recently married men, considered the warriors and young elders whose children had not been circumcised. They deemed the elders as too inexperienced to adjudicate cases in society; they mentored these men to adjudge by senior elders. Further, they assigned these elders to gather firewood, light the ceremonial fire, and roast the *Kĩama* meat.

The second council was *Kĩama gia Mataathi* or *Kĩama gia Mburi Igiri* (the council of two goats). To rise to this council, they had to give two goats and a lamb, hence the name (Muriuki 1969:162). According to Wa-Kang'ethe (1981:72),

the first goat, *mburi ya mwana* (child's goat), was given shortly before the circumcision of a member's first child; the second goat, *mburi ya Kĩama*, was given so that they could officially accept the member as a member of this council; and the lamb, *ndurume ya kuinukania* (lamb for blessing), was given to the

death; iv) provide physical security of the age mates in case a certain man was beaten or mistreated by his wife. Selected strong members of the age group would be sent to physically discipline the unruly wife.

council immediately they had circumcised his child in order to reunite the child with the family and to bless the homestead.

This council executed the legislative and judicial functions of the Agĩkũyũ nation, hence its esteem.

The third council was called *Kĩama gia Maturanguru* or *Kĩama gia Ukuru* (the council of the old age). To join this council, Waweru (2011:42) observes, members gave two he-goats. The Agĩkũyũ considered elders of this council the wisest in the land and referred to them as *muthamaki* (chief elder). They wore brass earrings and carried ceremonial leaves of *Maturanguru* as a symbol of authority, according to Wa-Kang'ethe (1981:72). These elders decided 'the dates of circumcision feasts and the holding of *Itwika* ceremony' (Kenyatta 1966:105).

Waweru (2011:42) identified *Kĩama gia guthathaiya* (religious council of elders) as the last stage. Members were required to have their children's children circumcised and their wives sexually inactive and beyond childbearing age. They also officiated at public religious ceremonies at the designated *Mugumo* (fig) tree and were the great custodians of the Agĩkũyũ religion and culture. Few got to this most honoured stage.

Liturgical Rites

Although the literature on the actual process of initiation is scanty, it involves a call and response of oathing that Kabetu (2017:103) explains occurs after they share meat:

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

(English translation) 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. (See also Ndereba 2021:49.)

Such initiation rites involving oaths were not unique to Agĩkũyũ. Mbiti (1999:122) observed the same among the Akamba. Senior elders did induction into the council, then defined to the new elders the responsibilities for which they took the oaths. The elders would arbitrate in disputes brought before them, and their judgment would be final (Ndereba 2021:49). Through their wise counsel, elders should deliver lasting peace in the society, by ending bitterness issuing from disputes and quarrels.

The Agĩkũyũ, like other African societies, according to Mbiti (1999:66), developed worship liturgies as they participated in prayers and the giving of offerings and sacrifices. They did not always offer these offerings to God, but also to lesser spiritual beings – such as ‘divinities, spirits and the departed’ (Mbiti 1999:66). In terms of prayers, the *Kĩama* members prayed facing Mount Kenya, lifting their hands, and invoking God, saying: *thai thathaiya Ngai thai* (worship God worship). During the ceremonies, a designated person led this invocation. The council of the *Kĩama* elders was the first responsibility to God. It is in response to God that these men become dedicated to ensuring justice prevails through the council to which they were inducted through a sacrifice.

Since in Agĩkũyũ traditional religion priests, rulers, the living dead, and ritual elders were mediators between man and God, it is easy to hitch the Agĩkũyũ eldership system to mediatorial office. In traditional African religions, Mbiti (1999:68) observed that 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.

Any religious functions in the Agĩkũyũ tradition had to be conducted by a priest, notes Leakey (2007:1082), who was drawn from the head of the family or clan and was assisted by other junior elders. Thus, according to Ndereba (2021:48), *Kĩama* ritual elders played a mediatorial role within Agĩkũyũ culture,

serving as, in the words of Mbiti (1999:66), ‘conveyor belts’ in approaching God.

Interpreting the *Kĩama*’s Sacrificial Rituals

In establishing the ethical reflection of *Kĩama*, this study uses ethical guidelines, drawing from the Agĩkũyũ values and norms. The impetus of the present of *Kĩama* appears to have three key motifs: cultural, political, and religious.

Cultural Motif

The belief that African cultures and religions were repugnant is now changing (Diocese of Mount Kenya South 2018:9). While the colonialists endeavoured to keep certain aspects of the Agikuyu system, not disorienting them, including the Agĩkũyũ initiation rites, Wa-Kang’ethe (1981:78) claims that the missionaries pushed to displace the Agĩkũyũ religious and belief system. They sought to replace them with a Christian belief system, including the initiation rites. Such missionaries included Cagnolo (Cagnolo and Pick 1933:257), who asked Rt Rev. Perlo⁸:

How could morals be found among the people who in their age-long abandonment, have become so corrupt as to raise practices openly immoral to be a social institution?

Thus, missionaries associated the Agikuyu religion and culture with the Devil. To turn to God, Wa-Kang’ethe (1981:104) noted, the missionaries demanded their converts break from their traditional religion and culture. The break was to be so complete that they deemed any accommodation of culture as going back to *gucokerera maundu ma Ugikuyu* (going back to things of the Agĩkũyũ) (Kibicho 1975:9). Theologians are challenging conclusions made by missionaries that Agĩkũyũ had no moral conscience.

Kenyatta (1966:190) laments that all *Ituika* (customary) songs and dances were banned at the instigation of missionaries as subjugating and dehumanising.

⁸ Rt Rev. Perlo was the initiator and the organiser of the Consolata Fathers among the Agĩkũyũ.

The members of councils were the ‘educators’ of the people. Wa-Kang’ethe (1981:71) noted, that their membership was based on age, individual wisdom, and communication ability within these councils and families, that the knowledge, history, myths, legends, beliefs, and traditions of the nation were imparted to the young and the old. A modern example was Amos Karani Kiroo. He was a Kikuyu elder and an expert *par excellence* on Agĩkũyũ marriage and initiation. Kiroo hosted a popular radio show on Kameme FM in the late 1990s on Agĩkũyũ culture and authored the book *Gĩkũyũ Marriage Simplified* (2011) because of the knowledge of culture. He also presided over countless *ngurarios* and *irua* (Agĩkũyũ traditional marriage ceremonies) for friends and friends of friends.

Political Motif

Proponents of the present (post-colonial) *Kĩama* gather to preserve culture and offer leadership to the community. The Agĩkũyũ, claims Wa-Kang’ethe (1981:69), had a democratic form of government exhibited in their social structures. Such involved the administrative and judicial councils, both the *Kĩama kia Bururi* (the National Council) and the local and the *Njama ya Ita* (the Warriors’ or the War Council). *Muthamaki* (chief elder) or *athamaki* (chief elders) were appointed leaders and ruled by moiety who presided over this council.

However, the adoption of the Local Native Councils, Wa-Kang’ethe (1981:76) observed, made the administrative role of the *Kĩama* redundant in 1925. By appointing chiefs, the colonialists shifted the authority centre in Agĩkũyũ society, when the chiefs replaced the traditional *athamaki* (chief elders). For example, in southern Kiambu, Kinyanjui wa Gathirimu replaced Waiyaki in 1892. This, according to Kenyatta (1966:190), was the last *Ituika* (circumcision ceremony), where ‘Mwangi took over from Maina during Muhingo and before the Kienjuku and the Nuthi [...] in Metumi and Gaki respectively’. Muriuki (1969:22) claims this change of power occurred between 1890-98. Kenyatta’s chief complaint against the British was,

that Irungu or Maina generation whose turn it was to take over the government from the Mwangi generation, between 1925 and 1928 [...] was denied the birthright of perpetuating the national pride. (1966:189)

Thus, by 1925, the colonial political structure virtually replaced the Agĩkũyũ political system and its administrative units. This, Wa-Kang'ethe (1981:78) claims, set in motion a gradual disorganisation of the Agĩkũyũ social structure.

Kĩama groups' postures support the government of the day and the county government of the day. They deny direct participation but indirectly participate in politics. In the just concluded national election, *Kĩama* leaders endorsed various political candidates. In a statement read by national chairman Ndichu wa Njuguna said:

Elders present and nationally elected *Kĩama* officials, without objection, agreed that honourable Speaker J. B Muturi is endorsed as the Mt Kenya East spokesperson, and this endorsement be conveyed to the Njuri Ncheke and Embu Cultural officials. (Otieno 2021)

The *Kĩama* today has manifested a political motif, seeking to restore the diminished role under British colonial rule and the independent government (Diocese of Mount Kenya South 2018:5).

Religious Motif

This study draws special insights from the action sciences and anthropological theory of the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep and British anthropologist Victor Turner to develop a strategy for action.

Kĩama Ceremonies as Initiation Rites

The *Kĩama* ceremonies bear the features of initiation rites like the ones advanced by van Gennep in his celebrated work, *Les Rites de Passage (The Rites of Passage)* (1909 and 1960). The *Kĩama* rites involving prayers, libation, isolation, rituals, and sacrifice of goats comport with van Gennep's definition of 'rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age' (Turner 1967:94). He sees performing the sacrifices as enabling an individual to make a meaningful change of status in society. This is in line with the sacrifices an Agĩkũyũ male made, according to anthropologist Agĩkũyũ, in seven landmark stages between birth and death to gain standing in society:

1. *Gakenge* – A newborn baby for the first few months. After that, they referred to him as *Kaana*, a 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-iiĩĩ*).
3. *Kĩhĩĩ* – A big boy nearing circumcision, which would be anything from twelve to eighteen 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 (*nĩ ũtigĩtie handũ*).
4. *Mumo – Kiumĩri* (singular), literally means ‘coming out’, and ‘emerging’ like a butterfly from a cocoon into the full bloom of God’s creation. Circumcision ceremonies – These were the most important of the Agĩkũyũ ceremonies of coming out. *Mambura ma irua*.
5. *Mwanake* – A young man until marriage. God’s material creation is 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* (community warrior) is a member of the warrior coupe and military. *Mwanake wa Njaama ya kamatimũ* is a member of the policing and guard coupe 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 Agĩkũyũ system of government had no chiefs or kings, all government was through a consensus in the various tribal councils. (Gĩkũyũ Centre for Cultural Studies 2017; see also Ndereba 2021:45)

A successive three-stage progression of separation, margin, and aggregation marked initiation rites according to Van Gennep (Turner 1967:94). In the *Kĩama* initiation case: first, according to Ndung’u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:658), initiation was done in the forests, fulfilling van Gennep’s

separation or pre-liminal stage, when a person or group becomes detached from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or an earlier set of social conditions. Second, members were required to pay a goat to be promoted from one grade to another. This fills the margin or the liminal stage when the state of the ritual subject is ambiguous. The individuals are not in the old state, but not yet in the new one. Individuals' talents, good morals, age, and proficiency in judicial and religious affairs were some qualifications considered for every grade. Third, the men were grouped according to their grades based on functions which had their duties and rights. This is the aggregation or the post-liminal stage when the ritual subject enters a new stable state with its rights and obligations (Turner 1967:94, 1968b:576-577).

Are Kĩama Ceremonies Acts of Worship?

Victor Turner's insights can help this study determine whether the sacrificing of goats at the *Kĩama* ceremony is religious worship or a rite of passage as is purported (Turner 1974, 1976, 1977, 1982). Turner applied the Van Gennep passage model and rituals in both tribal and modern industrial societies. What he found in rituals among the Ndembu compares favourably to those of modern society and among the Agĩkũyũ. These rituals involved symbolic manipulation and a reference to religion.

Deflem (1991) discusses Turner's approach to rituals, first as part of an ongoing process of social drama. Here, rituals play a significant role in a society's conflictual equilibrium. Second, he discusses dealing with symbols that make up the smallest units of ritual activity; symbols are carriers of meaning. Third, the meanings of symbols are multiple, giving unity to the morality of the social order and the emotional needs of the individual (Turner 1980:91-94).

Rituals, according to Turner (1968a:2), are symbols showing crucial social and religious values, by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative, as dealing with the crucial values of the community. Since they embody beliefs and meaningful symbols, Turner (1967:19) claims, they can be objects, activities, words, relationships, events, gestures, or spatial units. In Turner's definition, therefore, ritual refers to ritual performances involving manipulation of symbols that refer to religious beliefs. In the current practice of *Kĩama*, the goat is offered at the *Kĩama* eldership initiation rites for two main reasons: to atone for the sins of the elders and to introduce new elders to

other men. First, the elders must offer a libation to God, a sacrifice to atone for their inadequacies. Should they have offended the societal requirement, sacrificing goats and sheep should make up for their flaw. Second, the goat is sacrificed to initiate new elders into the council.

Ritual as symbols in perspective

Turner (1967:31-32) distinguished dominant and instrumental symbols. Dominant symbols appear in many ritual contexts, but their meaning possesses high autonomy and consistency throughout the total symbolic system. Kenyatta observes (in Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku 2021:45) that sheep and goats were important for the religious and cultural life of the Agĩkũyũ for purification and sacrificial rites among the Agĩkũyũ. Agreeing with him, the anthropologist Louis S. B. Leakey (2007:207) pointed to the incomparable value the Agĩkũyũ placed on goats and sheep in the social organisation. So, offering goats as a sacrifice was not just for *Kĩama*, but permeated most of the Agĩkũyũ life. For example, in the indigenous ritual of *Guciarwo na Mburi* (birth by goat), a ceremony where a stranger is 'born' into the community. Gathogo (2017) observes they slaughter a goat just like in the *mbũri cia Kĩama*, but they do not perceive this as worship, although blood is shed, and they make sacrifices. He cites an example where, in 1910, the Embu medical missionary Dr Crawford performed the ritual of *Guciarwo na mbũri*.⁹

In his rendition, John DeMathew (2009) opined an indispensable act that makes an Agĩkũyũ marriage endure. He states:

Atũmia aitũ magũrwo na rũru; (the dowry be paid by a flock)
thakame yacio ĩrũmagie mohiki; (the bloodshed will sustain the marriage)

kĩrathimo kũmage gatũrũme-inĩ; (blessings flow out of the slaughtered lamb)

⁹ 'In 1910, for his entrance fee, he presented the elders with a bull and there was a great feast. This made the Embu elders recognise him as one of their own, and his "religion" as part of theirs. In turn, they promised him "that they would now insist on all the people keeping God's Day and attending [church] service, and that he was to be the leading elder (*Muthamaki*)".' (Gathogo 2008)

karĩa mũhirĩga wao ukarũmia. (For the clan to partake)

Chorus:

Mburi cia Kiama ci negeruũ adhuri... (give council goats to the elders)

Kanitha wa Ngai uuge ũndũire ũcokio; (let the church of God encourage culture)

Na muma wa kĩrore ndikaugũkwo (And the oath of *kĩrore*, we shall not recant)¹⁰

DeMathew, in this song, affirms an old Agĩkũyũ belief that marriage lasts because goats are killed, and they shed blood during the dowry payment ceremony. He lists what comprised an enduring marriage union; comprised of shed animal blood, clan prayers, and fellowship in partaking meat, marriage will stand.

Rituals as instrumental symbols are the means of attaining the specific goals of each ritual performance. We can investigate instrumental symbols only in terms of the total system of symbols, which makes up a particular ritual since we can reveal their meaning only about other symbols. Deflem (1991) notes that it was Turner's opinion that using symbols in ritual empowers them to act upon the performer and cause a change in the person. The *Kĩama* rituals resulted in transforming the initiate's attitudes (status) and behaviour (responsibility). For Agĩkũyũ men, Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:646) observed, these eldership stages were important as a rite of passage. Once initiated, men gained social authority, influence, and power. Their status affected their wives, who also attained social status, responsibilities, and duties. Conversely, when husbands failed to ascend the social ladder, other women ridiculed their wives (Leakey 2007:4; Hopley 1967:430; Kenyatta 1966:101).

¹⁰ 'Mburi cia Kiama' track 5 in *Mene Mene Tekeli*.

<https://www.musixmatch.com/ko/lyrics/John-De-Mathew-2/Mburi-Cia-Kiama>

We must see the goat slaughter at *Kĩama* initiations for what it achieves: the polarising empirical properties of Turner's (1968a:18-19) dominant symbols. In the polarisation of meaning, the dominant symbol has two distinct poles of meaning:

1. at the ideological pole, a cluster of significata refers to components of the moral and social order, to principles of social organisation;
2. at the sensory pole, the significata are natural or physiological phenomena and processes that arouse desires and feelings.

One dominant symbol comprises both a natural necessity and a social desire. It, according to Turner (1967:54),

represents both the obligatory and the desirable. Here we have an intimate union of the moral and the material.

These included the fees paid to the elders in several goats and other requirements.

Rituals association with supernatural powers.

Most of the respondent African Christians, in the survey by Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:633), viewed the *Kĩama* initiations as religious, involving rituals and sacrifices, and demonic and against Christian norms. It is possible to characterise *Kĩama* activities as religious, as Kibicho (2006) framed the Mau Mau members in Kenya in 1952 as a religious conflict between African culture and Westernisation. They prayed (facing Mount Kenya) and offered sacrifices to *Ngai* (God) before launching their raids against the British government. They prayed '*Hoyai ma amu Ngai no uria wa tene*' (that is, continue praying to God (*Ngai*), comrades, the God of our ancestors). Kibicho's claims, about Mau Mau members, agree with allegations Leakey (1954:41) proffers that the Mau Mau movement withstood the British not because of war strategy but due to being an African religion. The Mau Mau was, asserts Leakey (1954:43),

a new religion, of which through oath ceremony formed only a small part that was the force which was turning thousands of peace-loving Kikuyu into murderous fanatics.

Today's *Kĩama* ceremony adapted Kikuyu traditional oaths (see § 3.2 above) for binding its members, as was done with Mau Mau freedom fighters. A Mau Mau oath commissioner, Samuel Gakuo Maceru, describes how he conducted the oaths (Gathogo 2014:21): once they slaughtered the goat or sheep, they mixed its stomach contents with herbs, water, and a little of the animal's blood. He would then place a grass hoop over the initiate's head and hands, then place some of the mixture on the initiate's hands and another portion of the mixture on a banana leaf waved over his head seven times. The initiate would then swear allegiance to the movement by repeating the words of oath as instructed. Thus, he/she would uphold the secrecy of the movement on the threat of death, pledge their possessions, and kill if necessary. The *Kĩama* ceremonies are not unique, since according to van Gennep (Turner 1967:94) the passage between any such groups requires a ceremony, or ritual, which is the rite of passage. Initiation rites of groups in modern society practise customs traceable to their sacred past. Van Gennep hypothesises that such 'social groups' are grounded in their magico-religious foundations as well.

Rituals performed in tribal, as in modern industrial, society, argued Turner (1976:504-505) are,

about matters of ultimate concern and about those entities believed to have enunciated, clarified and mediated a culture's bonding axioms to its present members.

For the Ndembu, rituals of affliction were referred to as religious belief in supernatural powers with shades of ancestors. Even though rituals in modern society occur in the secular domain of recreation, they, argues Turner (1974), are situated outside the confines of religious groups, and have some religious component. This is because, according to Turner (1982:12), they have,

something of the investigative, judgmental, and even punitive character of law-inaction, and something of the sacred, mythic, numinous, even 'supernatural' character of religious action.

All rituals are religious, Turner and Turner conclude, because they all 'celebrate or commemorate transcendent powers' (1982:201).

Rituals in modern society share characteristics, in Turner's view, with the tribal rituals he studied in Ndembu society, where 'all life is pervaded by invisible influences' (1976:507). In this way, tribal societies are wholly religious, and ritual actions surrounding their religions are 'nationwide'. It oriented them towards 'all members of the widest effective community' (Turner 1977:45).

Rituals can be traced to religious beliefs and symbols. Turner holds them to be related, hence his definition of ritual as,

a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests (1977:183)

Meanwhile, van Gennep (Turner 1967:94) concurs that rituals must not be viewed in the sacred domain alone, for the presenting act is in the secular, with no sacred connotation.

Since the industrial revolution and because of secularisation, modern religion, claims Turner (1968c:441-443), is decoupled from the rest of culture. Religion in modern societies is, writes Turner (1976:507),

regarded as something apart from our economic, political, domestic, and recreational life. Religion is part of the division of social labour.

Turner, thus, regards the rituals of modern, industrial religion as liminal (as are tribal rituals where religion and other cultural sectors are interwoven). This is because it is no longer, as its most distinct characteristic, a community affair but is individualised and covers a certain aspect of specific groups. In modern societies, the institutions are disintegrated and independent of each other. These institutions, thus, deal with given needs and respond to certain questions members face, such include law, politics, economy, and/or religion. Rituals occurring in such domains may not carry religious connotations, as they occur where supernatural matters are not dealt with.

But Moore and Myerhoff (1977) question whether this distinction can be made between religious and secular rituals while being cognisant of Turner's distinction between tribal and modern societies. In tribal societies, as Turner argued, religion, economy, law, politics, and other cultural domains are interwoven. Muchunu Gachuki, a member of the African Independent Pentecostal Church of Africa (AIPCA) administered the Mau-Mau oath:

[c]onsists of vows and commandments. People who have no sacred vows cannot be said to be religious [...] Our 'creeds' in Mau-Mau were organised in accordance with those of Kikuyu Central Association [political party formed in 1925] which existed before Mau-Mau [...] based mainly on the traditional beliefs of the Kikuyu [...] that, 'we are praying to the God of Kikuyu and Mumbi' who gave to us this country - a country that was alienated by the Europeans (Gathogo 2014:21).

Tribal rituals, therefore, must have some religious component since tribal religion in both mythology and ritual practices has not (yet) split off from other sectors of tribal culture. Hence, the sacrifices and prayers at *Kĩama* eldership should be understood as a socio-cultural rite of passage and not a worship-religious event. Although these observers are quick to perceive the rite as spiritual worship, there is a need to distinguish *Kĩama's* initiation rites from Agĩkũyũ acts of worship.

The Appropriateness of *Kĩama* for Christians Today

Christians among the Agĩkũyũ should formulate a plan of action for the *Kĩama* phenomenon, applying strategies based on the understanding adduced above. This will allow them to develop a strategy for leading a congregation through change.

We can understand *Kĩama* rituals in this light, as not fully embracing the entire way, but certain aspects of life. Karanja wa Mwangi, the head of Agĩkũyũ Academy committed to restoring the customs including *Kĩama kia Mbũri*. He describes himself as a progressive advocate of culture and accepts changes such as 'eradicated female genital mutilation' (2022:5). Mwangi (2022:5) states:

All that we do not subscribe to is colonialists' doctrine in the church, but we can't go back to wearing skins the way our fathers used to do. We have those traditionalists who advocate for such uncivilized practices, and this confuses us.

Kĩama adherents have transformed their operations to avoid conflicting with their Christian faith. They have, according to Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:670),

stopped advocacy for rites such as of 2nd birth, circumcision, dances and elaborate ceremonies, warrior ship, women circumcision, *guthiga*, *hukuro*, and traditional operation apparatus, but they keep facing Kirinyaga while praying.

Hence, they do not advocate for a second birth rite, female circumcision, or obscene and sexually oriented dances during the circumcision rite of boys. They do not advocate for *guthiga* or joining warriors. *Kĩama* modernised aspects of this tradition by swapping spears and shields for books and pens given to initiates since the battlefield had changed. The oral teachings changed for literary instructions. Here, initiates took notes and, upon graduation, got certificates instead of the elaborate ceremonies and dances marking the new status. Although the initiation rites are done, as in the pre-colonial period. They replaced the drinking of *muratina* with water and soda. But they must roast meat.

Even though 15% of Ndung'u, Onyango, and Githuku's (2021:662) respondents regarded *Kĩama* as irrelevant, they acknowledged it raised genuine issues for the government. And 20% of respondents considered *Kĩama* as the partner of the government and church in the fight against 'drunkenness, immorality, sanctity of life and other abuses in the society such as female circumcision'. But 'these groups are active participants in national and regional politics' (Diocese of Mount Kenya South 2018:8).

Considering the distinction Mbiti (1991:63) made regarding occasional sacrifices, involving the shedding of animal blood, and regular offerings individuals make, including the giving of foodstuffs, milk, or honey and the libation through their ancestors, these do not amount to worship or religious

sacrifice. This concurs with the conclusion reached by T. M. Kirimi Kibaara, Bibiana Ngundo, and Peter Gichure (2020:2562) that,

the church needs to recognize *mbūri cia Kiama* as one rite of passage within the Gikuyu culture to embrace the concept of Christianizing certain aspects of the traditional ritual.

The turbulent political climate around ethnicities has given the need for ethnic intervention. In their survey, Ndung’u, Onyango, and Githuku (2021:665) saw the need for ethnic elder-driven engagement and reconciliation whenever needed. So, if the Agĩkũyũ is to survive, politically and economically, in lands away from their traditional homelands, such as the Rift Valley, *Kiama kia Athuri* would be the vehicle for peace, reconciliation, and political patronage.

Today’s version of *Kiama* is much diluted, bent towards politicking, and commercialised. Ndung’u (2022) claimed the *Kiama* eldership has substituted initiation goats for a fee paid in cash. And this act may remove the major objection of Christians.

While this approach can secure the interests of the Agĩkũyũ society, identity politics is destructive for a country like Kenya. When we make ‘tribes’ the basis of our relationships, we will lose the ‘nation’ in the tribal mire. I maintain my previously published conclusion that:

We must move from the politics of ‘our tribe’ to the politics of ‘Kenya’, then we will rediscover the counter-intuitive truth, as Sacks (2020) states, that a nation is strong when it cares for the weak, that it becomes invulnerable when it cares about the vulnerable. (Omondi 2022)

The church stands to be destroyed by the logic of tribal politics and not the blood in the *Kiama* ceremonies. It conditions us to act on tribal self-interest without a commitment to the nation’s common good. When this logic creeps into the church, the body will be dismembered, torn between loyalty to their tribe and Christ.

Conclusion

This study establishes that the *Kĩama* initiation ceremonies are initiatory rites into eldership or stages of adulthood. It decouples the rituals from sacrifices performed as Agĩkũyũ religious rites. So, the goats slaughtered during the *Kĩama* meeting, though they appear to be offerings, are not sacrifices to God as in the Agĩkũyũ religious ceremony. It recognises *Kĩama*'s political motif in addressing the Agĩkũyũ interest in regional and national matters. Even though the *Kĩama* participates in the political welfare of the community in times of disputes. However, the community must consider the risks of being insular in a multi-ethnic country. The church will be disembowelled by the logic of tribal politics rather than the ritual blood of the *Kĩama*.

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