

THE QUEST FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN KENYA (1887-1963)

Julius Gathogo¹

School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal,
Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Abstract

The freedom to choose one's religion is one of the basic freedoms that every person needs to enjoy. It is also one of the fundamental rights that the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed on 10 December 1948. In Africa, since religion and culture are hard to separate, a denial of religious freedom is tantamount to denying all other rights that the UN declared. This includes: the right to life; the right to liberty and security; the right to education; equality before the law; freedom of movement and religion; freedom of association; and freedom to marry and have a family, among others (Gitari 1996:18). The article attempts to survey the nature of missionary and colonial suppression of African religious discourses of the Kikuyu of Kenya during the colonial period (1887-1963). In other words, how were the Kikuyu religious discourses undermined by the missionary activity that ran concurrently with the expansion of European hegemony in Kikuyuland, and how did it supplement the colonial policy? How did the Africans attempt to reclaim their religious freedom? To achieve its stated goal, the article not only cites some cases where suppressions of Kikuyu traditionalism and religion by both the missionaries and the British administrators are evident, but it also attempts to show the African reaction to this course of events. On a positive note, it also cites some cases of the philanthropic ministry of the European missionaries, especially how they

¹ Dr. Julius Gathogo is a postdoctoral research fellow at the School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. His email is jungathogo@yahoo.com or jgathogom@yahoo.com. He is a visiting lecturer at Daystar University's Nairobi Campus, Kenyatta University's Mombasa Campus and Kenya Methodist University's Mombasa Campus. He can be contacted via post office through: Bishop Hannington Institute, P O BOX 81150- 80100 Mombasa, Kenya.

responded to a series of natural disasters that had hit the Kikuyu Nation. By and large, the article rests on the premise that, even though no culture is perfect, Gospel supersedes culture. Genuine propagation of Christianity will not need to discard the culture of the people being evangelised because not only is this suppressive but, more importantly, it poses the danger of Christianity appearing as “a religion that operates in a vacuum”.

1 INTRODUCTION

African religious discourses have been systematically suppressed in pre-colonial Africa since the Berlin Conference of 1884 to 1885, where Africa was partitioned by several European powers whether the prospective subjects liked it or not. After this scramble and partitioning, Britain, Belgium, Portugal, Spain and Germany divided Africa into segments according to their liking, thereby creating their respective spheres of influence. As much as it affected African religion and culture, it also affected the spread of Christianity in Africa. For before then, the missionary societies established their missions wherever they felt regardless of their nationality and denominationalism. And in view of this, the Rev. Dr Ludwig Krapf who was a German and a Lutheran Priest, served with Church Missionary Society, an Anglican society from England, and with others re-introduced¹ Christianity in the East Africa Coast in 1844 (Nthamburi 1991:7-8). In time, this ecumenical cooperation was affected by the spirit of nationalism that followed the colonial expansion.

Modern African states exist as a result of this Berlin Conference of 1884 to 1885. Now, this article assumes that the State in Africa was the result of an attempt to reproduce the European State under African conditions. Hence the conclusion that the attempt to imitate the original has failed. The truth is that the State in Africa is a product of a different history, a history of conquest. Colonial powers, in cahoots with some missionaries, reformed the nature of the State as they attempted to generate support for alien rule. In particular, the British took the lead with a reform called *indirect rule*. The French came up with the policy of *assimilation* whereby an African was expected to be a complete duplicate of a Frenchman, in manners, talk, language, accent, religion, eating habits, and dressing, among other things. Others like the

Belgians followed suit. As will be demonstrated, this attempt at “reforming” the African State has affected African religious consciousness to date (Gathogo 2001:60f).

Just as with colonialism, the coming of Christianity, which arrived hand-in-hand with colonialism, did not help matters. The reality as expressed by Banana (1991:23) in his contention that “to almost every African, the whole life journey is religious drama; [and that] human kind [read Africans] lives in a religious universe; practically every aspect in the cosmos, every activity, space and time is expressed and experienced religiously”, was not given room by either the missionaries nor the colonialists. It is no wonder that the Lutheran missionary Bishop of Bukoba of the then Tanganyika (now Tanzania), Bengt Sundkler (1961:297) dismissed the rise of African Initiated Churches in the 1930s, “as the bridge over which Africans are brought back to heathendom”. In other words, he could not see any authentic or positive contribution that the African Initiated Churches would make to the African Christianity. To him, it was unnecessary evil that needed to be exterminated in good time.

Similarly, and as will be demonstrated in this article, the colonial authorities had harsh ways of dealing with any “African religiosity”. In some cases, they used force Africans to suppress their religious discourses. Sometimes, the practitioners of African traditional religion (including some of the founders of African Instituted Churches) were treated as seditious, and as threats to the “national security”. Clearly, such denials of African religious freedom have always failed to appreciate that the suppression of the early Church in the first century CE did not succeed in erasing Christianity from the map of the world. It also fails to take cognisance of the fact that even St Paul who converted from Judaism to Christianity did not abandon totally the religion that he had converted from (Judaism). Rather, he continued using his tradition and traditional religion to understand his new religion (read Christianity) and explain it to others (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:22; Philippians 3: 5-6; 1 Corinthians 11:25).² Sadly, such approaches of using the “old religion” to understand the “new religion” in order to easily explain it to others causes the practitioners of African Theology to be accused of acting like “old wine in new containers” (Ekenga-Metuh 1987:20).

Thus, in dismissing the idea of borrowing some elements of African culture and religion to enrich African Christianity, the 19th and 20th century CE European missionaries clearly failed to see the conversion of St Paul from Judaism religion and culture as a prototype for conversion in Africa. Similarly, the use of force to suppress African traditional religion by the colonial authorities, as will be cited in this article, shows the intolerance that the African religious discourses have continued to experience in both pre-colonial Kenya and post-colonial Africa. In view of this, I intend to highlight some of these suppressions of African religious discourses in pre-colonial Africa and especially among the traditional Kikuyu society of Kenya (1887-1963), and further to show how they attempted to reclaim their religious freedom.

2 SUPPRESSIONS DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD (1887-1963)

Historically, the first Kikuyu³ contact with the Europeans was in 1887 when Count Teleki and his caravan arrived in Dagorreti near the capital city of Nairobi, Kenya. As the story goes, they were well received with warm African hospitality. They were received by Waiyaki-wa-Hinga (1840s-92), the paramount leader (*Muthamaki*) of the Kikuyu in Southern Kiambu district. In a solemn ceremony, Teleki and Waiyaki took the oath of blood brotherhood as was customarily done with all outsiders. Following Teleki's expedition, Captain Frederick D Lugard and George Wilson arrived in Dagorreti in 1890. As fate would have it, they were also received by Waiyaki and his clan mates. As a result, an oath of blood brotherhood was taken to unite the two races together (Richards 1960:11-16). However, in 1891, a less friendly expedition under Eric Smith and A Purkiss destroyed Waiyaki's homestead, camped within it, and set up a fort. The expedition destroyed more than thirty villages and crops, as well as taking countless numbers of livestock. When Waiyaki protested, he was arrested and deported to Kibwezi, near Mombasa, where he died. In view of the fact that a Kikuyu *Muthamaki* (leader) epitomised the religious consciousness of the society, Waiyaki's death was seen as a religious martyrdom, which consequently became a turning point in the Kikuyu nationalism that followed later (Rosberg & Nottingham 1966:14).

Following the death of Waiyaki, Kinyanjui wa Gathirimu was made the first chief among the Kikuyu. Prior to the coming of the Europeans, the members of the Kikuyu community did not have chiefs for they were governed by a paramount leader (*Muthamaki*). This *Muthamaki* could be an elder who was highly regarded as a statesman. And due to the patriarchal hold on the society, *Muthamaki* had always been a man since the pre-historic days when the Kikuyu shifted from matriarchy to patriarchy (Kenya 1938:2-3). This statesman was normally chosen by the people for his ontological wisdom and ability to lead the people. The imposition of a chief by the Europeans was thus a blow to their religious and social organisations. It was indeed a socio-religious suppression to the extreme. Obviously, the idea of choosing leaders began among the Kikuyu after the first pre-historic *Itwika* (break away) revolution, which overthrew the dictatorship of King Gikuyu. From that time onwards, *Itwika* ceremonies that basically marked the end of generational eras became the norm of the society.⁴

Another punitive expedition took place in 1894. In this, Francis Hall and Major Smith carried out a raid in the Kiambu and Murang'a districts of Central Kenya. Colonel Meinertzhagen carried out a third one, in 1904. In all these expeditions, hundreds of Kikuyu were killed in cold blood. Additionally, their villages were burned down, while livestock were taken and others destroyed (Rosberg & Nottingham 1966:162-164). Subsequently, these brutal invasions were followed by massive land alienation by the Europeans. Consequently, Africans in Central Kenya had become "tenants" on their own soil by 1930. For according to F B Welbourn (1961:116) "by 1926, nine thousand square miles [of land] were in the hands of about two thousand Europeans...as against the forty-seven thousand square miles...for an African population of about two and a half million." Among the Kikuyu, land is not only an economical issue but also, more importantly, a religious issue among the members of Kikuyu traditional society. For, as Kenya (1938:22) says,

Land tenure [is] the most important factor in the social, political, religious, and economic life of the tribe. As agriculturalists, the Kikuyu people depend entirely on the land. It supplies them with the material needs of life, through which spiritual and mental contentment is

achieved. Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in which the ancestors of the tribe lie buried. The Gikuyu consider the earth as the “mother” of the tribe, for the reason that the mother bears her burden for about eight or nine moons while the child is in her womb, and then for a short period of suckling. But it is the soil that feeds the child through lifetime; and again after death it is the soil that nurses the spirits of the dead for eternity. Thus the earth is the most sacred thing above all that dwell in or on it. Among the Gikuyu, the soil is especially honoured, and an everlasting oath is to swear by the earth (*koirugo*).

The first British Missionary group to arrive in Central Kenya was the East African Scottish Industrial Mission, in 1898. It was later renamed, the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM; read Presbyterians). Headed by the Rev. Thomas Watson, CSM set up its first mission in Tumutumu in Nyeri district, in 1908. And for the CSM to achieve its aims, the missionaries persuaded the Kikuyu in the locality to donate, sell, or relinquish some of the land for its expansion and settlement. With land being a religious issue through which communion with the ancestors is assured, (as Kenyatta has noted above), the locals refused to give out their land. As a result, Rev. Watson sought the help of the Protectorate Government to alienate 3 000 acres of land at Thogoto. Similarly, Rev. Barlow of Tumutumu, threatened to use force if the Kikuyu, who were living in the surrounding area, did not give or sell the land to the mission. In this case, the Tumutumu Kikuyu yielded out of fear that whether they accepted or rejected the proposal, it would be taken anyway (Muriuki 1974:178ff).

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) was the second mission group to establish their station in Kikuyuland. This was at Kabete near the capital city of Nairobi in 1901. Other CMS Mission Stations followed suit. They included: Weithaga and Kahuhia in Murang’a district in 1903 and 1906 respectively; Mahiga in Nyeri district in 1908; Kabare in the present-day Kirinyaga district in 1910; Kigari in Embu district in 1910; and Mutira in Kirinyaga district in 1912, among others. At the present-day Emmanuel Anglican Church, Mutira, Kirinyaga district, the pioneer European missionary was Brandon Laight, who had joined the CMS Kenya Mission in 1899. Before he moved to pioneer

the work at Mutira, in 1912, he had served at Mukaa in Kambaland and at Mahiga in Nyeri. Both areas were later transferred to the (AIM) African Inland Mission and the CSM respectively.

Thus, the missionaries worked hand-in-hand with the Protectorate (later colonial) government to ensure the smooth running of their missions. An explanation of this: after the initial period of conquest, the Protectorate government appointed African chiefs and headmen to assist in local administration. These appointees were tasked with responsibilities such as the maintenance of public order, recruitment of “communal labour”, hearing and determining petty native cases and, for a brief period between, 1902 and 1910, collection of hut tax. This hut tax was a way used by the Protectorate government to find new sources of revenue; and it consisted of two rupees which were payable annually by the occupier of any hut. This introduction of monetary economy and hut tax, plus the land alienations of Kikuyuland, forced most men to leave their homes in search of employment. In turn, the mission stations offered employment opportunities and, as a result, some converted to Christianity as a way of guaranteeing themselves a job.⁵ For this was their only way of improving their lot.

In view of this, the appointed chiefs (by the British administrators) owed their allegiance to the Protectorate rather than the Kikuyu society. At Mutira CMS Mission in the present-day Kirinyaga district, the assistant chief, Ndegwa wa Kimere, supported the missionary work in order to protect his job for he had seen his immediate predecessor, Munge wa Ndaruru, being dismissed through the influence of Brandon Laight, the pioneer missionary at Mutira. As a matter of fact, the immediate cause of Munge’s dismissal was his refusal to provide a passageway for the missionary’s bicycle. It was indeed Laight who recommended Ndegwa wa Kimere to the local District Commissioner (DC). Ndegwa was keen on recruiting school children and indeed, one of those whom he recruited was Johana Njumbi, who later became the first African Anglican priest from Ndia Division of Kirinyaga district. Indeed, Rev. Canon Johana Njumbi, as he later became, started schooling in 1914 after Ndegwa had “persuaded” his father to provide a boy for instruction at the mission.⁶

As John Karanja observes, by 1914, after 14 years of vigorous missionary activity, the CMS ministry in Kikuyuland had seen the setting up of seven mission stations and three out-stations with 419 adherents, of whom 186 were baptised, 66 were regular communicants and 233 were under definite instructions. Furthermore, in the same year, the attendance at the CMS's 13 schools averaged 682 and African teachers numbered 12 (Karanja 1999:48). CMS was followed by the African Inland Mission (AIM) in Kijabe, Kiambu district in 1901.⁷ In 1902, the Pentecostal element among the AIM broke away and formed the Gospel Missionary Society (GMS). In turn, the GMS established a mission in Kambui in Kiambu district. The Roman Catholic Mission of Italian Fathers was established in Kiambu town in 1902, Limuru in 1903, and Mang'u in the present-day Thika district in 1906 (Oliver 1970:170ff).

Of great concern was the fact that the setting up of Christian missions in Kikuyuland did not only coincide with the punitive expeditions, which led to massive land alienations, but more importantly, it also coincided with the official declaration of Kenya as a British Protectorate in 1895. Subsequently, Kenya was confirmed as a British colony in 1920. These coincidences made the Kikuyus suspicious of whatever role the missionaries were playing however good it was, be it the establishment of schools, hospitals or churches. At some stage, ordinary Kikuyus could be heard saying, *Gutiri muthungu na mubia*, that is, "There is no marked difference between a white missionary or a white settler/colonial administrator" (Nthamburi 1995:39). In other words, "Their common denominator is seen in the fact that they suppress us from all angles!"

This arrival of Christianity in Kikuyuland did not only coincide with the punitive expeditions, noted above, but it also matched up with a series of natural disasters such as rinderpest (1898), a drought-induced famine (1898-1900) and smallpox (1899-1900). As Karanja observes, rinderpest decimated Kikuyu cattle and goats (Karanja 1999:50). In turn, famine and smallpox brought great loss of human life. In some areas, the death toll from famine and smallpox is estimated to have been as high as 50 percent of the population.⁸ As much as the missionaries participated in the suppression of Kikuyu religious and cultural discourses, in this case, they addressed these

natural disasters with a human face. For indeed, all the missionary societies operating in the region participated actively in the distribution of food and medicines at the relief camps that were set up by the British Protectorate Government. In particular, the Roman Catholics inoculated 3 000 people against smallpox (Karanja 1999:50). And by February 1900, the Church of Scotland missionaries were caring for 81 victims of smallpox and feeding 200 to 300 Kikuyu on daily basis.⁹ And even though A W McGregor, the pioneer CMS missionary to Kikuyuland, was a latecomer to the scene, he was equally involved in famine relief (Karanja 1999:50).

At this stage, it is critical to appreciate that even if the missionaries were instrumental in the suppression of the cultural and religious discourses of the Kikuyu, in some cases, they however earned good names for some of their behaviours that resonated well with the expectations and the wishes of the locals. Some illustrations of this will suffice. First, their philanthropic activities, following the series of natural disasters that had befallen the nation in the latter part of the 19th and the early part of the 20th century, were clearly felt. Referring to this, Karanja (1999:50) notes, the following:

Missionary participation in relief work both spread their good name and brought them into close contact with the local people. Indeed, it was during that time that some of the earliest mission “converts” were made. Were it not for the fact that Kikuyu society already knew the ritual exchange of identity between circumcision guilds to cope with calamity, this response to the great famine would seem to confirm the “social disruption theory” of conversion.

Karanja’s view does not however point out the fact that the negative attitude of the missionaries toward Africans had not yet manifested itself at that early stage. For with time, their dismissal of African religious discourses, as fetish, pagan, and lacking in substance became evident.

Second, their setting up of dispensaries in which the sick were treated, made the missionaries resemble the Kikuyu medicine men. In particular, all seven CMS stations in Central Kenya had set up

dispensaries to treat the sick. Kahuhia and Kigari had qualified doctors by 1913. For example, Dr Edmund Crawford and Mrs Abishag Mwithi were qualified doctors (Karanja 1999:54, 80). The missionary doctors “could not however surpass the traditional Medical Practitioners”, especially with regard to the question of countering misfortunes, that is, dealing with the metaphysical world. As a result, most Kikuyu Christians continued to secretly consult the traditional practitioners (*andu ago*) especially during times of crisis (Karanja 1999:71). This shows the resilient nature of African religion.

Third, their mechanical gadgets attracted huge crowds. In particular, Douglass Hooper and Edmund Crawford at Kabare, in Kirinyaga district, made use of their gramophones (known locally as “Columbia” after their make) to attract the locals who saw them as new magic. At Weithaga Mission Station, in Murang’a district, McGregor put his lantern slides to similar use. Again, the missionaries’ offer of sugar, salt, money, and clothes to school-going pupils attracted them all the more (Karanja 1999:54). This did not however mean that Christianity gained genuine adherents at this stage; attraction held a far greater drawing power than the wish for adherence.. Ignoring the culture of the locals in their missionary duties meant that genuine conversion was just a mirage.

Fourth, there were limited cases where the missionaries identified themselves with the culture and the religious discourses of the locals. Such earned genuine converts to African Christianity. Dr Crawford is such a unique example. In particular, Crawford attempted to identify himself with traditional system of government and in 1910 he sought to join the Embu Council of Elders with the hope of influencing the society from within. And for his entrance fee, “he presented the elders with a Bull and there was a great feast” (Karanja 1999:72). This made the Embu Elders to 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 service, and that he was to be the leading elder *Muthamaki*” (Karanja 1999:72). Indeed such gestures served the missionaries well.

Crawford’s gesture agrees with the incarnation model as St Paul described it in 1 Corinthians 9:22, when he said: “To the weak I

became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”

In other words, St Paul acknowledged that, in order to reach people, the Gospel must be shared with them on their own level of thinking. This agrees with John V Taylor’s observation for, in his book, *The growth of the church in Buganda* (1958), Taylor states that many Baganda began to respond positively to Christianity when the pioneer missionaries began to “assimilate themselves to [the] social structure[s] and to look less foreign” (Taylor 1958:43).

Thus, while most European missionaries were busy “spreading” Christianity in total disregard of the existing religious consciousness of the locals a few were conscious of it. In view of this, they (the few) must have taken St Paul’s conversion as the prototype of conversion in Africa – where he did not discard the religious discourses of those whom he evangelised nor did he discard his Judaism background (2 Corinthians 11:22; Philippians 3: 5-6; 1 Corinthians 11:25). By ignoring their subjects’ worldview, and seeking to impose theirs on them, the missionaries were not only risking becoming irrelevant but more importantly, they were abusing the hospitality of their hosts.

3 REACTION AND COUNTER-REACTIONS (1887-1963)

3.1 The case of keeping culture, “religion” and politics out of the church

The insistence by the European missionaries in Kikuyuland that Africans must keep culture and politics out of Christianity split the Church into two theologically irreconcilable groups. Those who opposed the missionaries’ theological position of keeping culture and politics out of religion came to be known as *Agikuyu a Karing’a* (Kikuyu Cultural Nationalists), while those who supported the missionaries’ demand were known as *Agikuyu a Kirore* (Fingerprint or Abolitionists Kikuyu) (Waruiru 1971:26). By culture, I mean participating in customary practices such as female circumcision, dances, songs, and rituals associated with it called *Mambura* (divine services); while by politics, I mean participating in the concerns of African Nationalism movement that was taking shape. For example, in their dismissal of female circumcision, the missionaries considered

female circumcision as punitive, impulsive, unchristian, and medically unnecessary. As for a boy's circumcision, the European settlers described it as psychologically harmful and economically bad (Routledge & Pease 1968:166-167). This split in the church led to disturbances in virtually the entire Kikuyu Nation. That is, Kijabe, Kambui, Tumutumu, and Kikuyu. In particular, the *Agikuyu a Karing'a* group attacked AIM and GMS missions at Kihumbuini, Murang'a in 1923. In addition, African clergy and teachers were attacked and abused, thereby heightening the hostilities toward missionaries.

These suppressions of African religious heritage reached their zenith in 1923 when Harry Thuku, the first educated African Nationalist in Central Kenya (comparable to Chief Albert Luthuli of South Africa), was arrested. It was also the "season" when the first political nationalist movement, the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA) was formed in 1924. And following these disturbances in the Nyeri, Murang'a, and Kiambu areas, Dr John Arthur of CSM and other missionaries counter-reacted by lobbying the government support and, as a result, the government came in to "restore peace and order" (see Rosberg & Nottingham 1966:46-98).

The year before Dr. Arthur – who ironically opposed African participation in politics – was appointed, the representative of African interests in the Legislative Council (read Parliament) in 1928, a meeting to stamp out female circumcision was convened in March 1929, at Tumutumu. In this meeting, it was resolved that "female circumcision was evil and should be abandoned by all Christians [and that] all the Christians submitting to it should be suspended by all churches everywhere" (McPherson 1970:108). In all these campaigns by both the government and the missionaries, the aim was to strip the total religious and ontological significance of the Kikuyu rites and thereby reduce them to mere social and secular rites.

3.2 The birth of African nationalism

During the First World War (1914-1918) (hereafter, WW1), some Africans were unwillingly made to serve in the Carrier Corps in Tanganyika,¹⁰ and India, among other places. For the Africans to finally accept to go to war alongside the British, the British had told

them that the Germans were cannibals who, if not defeated, would invade Kenya and capture Africans for meat. This propaganda was meant to encourage Africans to see WW1 as being to their own benefit.¹¹ When, one, Mzee Njeru wa Kanyenje,¹² the maternal grandfather of Professor Jesse Mugambi, arrived at the warfront, he discovered that the description of Germans as cannibals was a British propaganda tool meant to garner the support of Africans for what was essentially a European war. In addition, he and his peers found that Germans were fellow tribesmen of the British, except that possibly they belonged to a different clan. Mzee Kanyenje and others thus concluded that the British administrators must have been liars. Besides this, they felt that British and the Germans ought to have resolved their tribal dispute(s) at home, in Europe, and should not have involved Africans in the first place.¹³ He also felt that the European powers could have avoided such an unnecessary war if they had paid attention to the African religious heritage. In other words, they should have sat together and sought consensus on their problems and thereby become reconciled – a phenomenon that is well emphasised in the *Ubuntu* philosophy (Mugambi 1995:132). And, as Africans returned after the war in 1918, they were already a politicised lot who began their quests for freedom, justice and democracy. Thus, the Nationalistic zeal began all over the land.

One incident that further expresses the birth of African Nationalist zeal is seen in late 1929. In this incident, young people of Kabete, near Nairobi, started a dance-song called *Muthirigu* to dramatise the Kikuyu religio-cultural nationalist struggle against church and colonial government. The government banned it in January 1930 but, despite this ban, it became an anthem of resistance until the 1940s and 1950s when the *Mau Mau* revolutionary struggle started. Coupled with this ban, the *Karing'a* group (cultural nationalists) was summarily expelled from the mission churches, while others led protests. Additionally, their children were expelled from mission schools, a phenomenon that created an education crisis in Kikuyuland. In turn, this led the cultural nationalists to urgently work towards establishing *Karing'a* churches (read African Initiated Churches) and schools. This ultimately happened!

In 1935, Archbishop William D Alexander from South Africa arrived in Kenya after the *Karing'as* (cultural nationalists) worked very hard to

get a person who would not only help them establish their own churches and schools which would appreciate African religious discourses and culture. Archbishop Alexander was a member of Marcus Garvey's African Orthodox Church.¹⁴ He had been ordained as a Priest of the African Orthodox Church in New York on 11 September, 1927. The African Orthodox Church, in turn, advocated the cultural liberation of African peoples. It also advocated a return of African Americans to Africa (Welbourn 1961). As a result, Alexander was able to assist in the establishment of the first *Karing'a* seminary at Gituamba, Murang'a district, in November 1935. He also ordained the first African clergyman. In time, the "new" clergymen (as there were no women ordained), were instrumental in the establishment of the two major Independent Churches that we have in Kenya today. They are the African Orthodox Church (AOC), and the African Independent Pentecostal Church (AIPC).¹⁵

At this stage, it is critical to appreciate that the *Karing'a* Independent Churches differed substantially from the teachings in the mission churches. This was mainly seen in the fact that they borrowed heavily from the Kikuyu religious worship. An example was their mode of prayer during which they faced Mount Kenya (formerly Mount Kirinyaga) – the sacred Mountain of the Kikuyu people and, unlike prayer at the Mission, they opened their eyes. Characteristically, they would end their prayers by chanting, *Thaai, thathaiya Ngai, thaai* (we beseech thee, O God). On the issue of Baptism, the *Karing'a* held that one was assumed to have made a decision to dissociate oneself from the European missionaries and the Abolitionists (*Agikuyu a Kirore*). Similarly, the Holy Communion was interpreted from the view of the Kikuyu traditional way of partaking of sacrificial meat (body), and the blood (wine) as a means of ontological purification of the individual and the community. In terms of Christology, Christ was seen as a good ancestor and not as the only begotten Son of God; for they argued that men and women are all daughters and sons of God.¹⁶

While accepting the centrality of the Bible, the *Karing'a* churches however rejected what they called "the missionary commandments", such as, "Thou shall not drink or take snuff", "Thou shall not circumcise your daughters", "Thou shall not keep more than one wife at a time", and "Thou shall not interact with your Kikuyu culture if you

are a genuine Christian". They found the Old Testament very inspiring especially where it would portray some religious leaders, like Solomon, as polygamists. Furthermore, they would incorporate biblical personalities such as Jesus and his disciples, Moses, Abraham, and the prophets into their schema of ancestral beings.¹⁷

In all these religious and social discourses, it was the establishment of Kenya African Teachers College (KATC) in January 1939 that made the colonial government and the mission churches realise the determination of Africans to uphold their religion and culture alongside Christianity. In other words, this was a bold statement that the Africans were prepared not only to train their own teachers for their independent schools but more importantly to extend the nationalist struggle. And as fate would have it, the Teachers' College was built at Githunguri, Kiambu district. Why? First of all, Githunguri was near the capital city of Nairobi. Hence, they could easily access some needed materials, and thereby move their "project" faster. Second, they were responding to a prophecy by Chege wa Kibiru (c.1850-1908), the Seer, in 1890s, that "after the Agikuyu had been scattered in many parts of the country by the White Man, a time will come when they shall all gather at Githunguri. When they gather there, they shall build a big house (*thingira*) with nine doors. When this happens, they shall know that the time has come for the White Man to go home."¹⁸ Interestingly, this "Kikuyu only" prophecy was given a pan-African dimension by Jomo Kenyatta who was one of the chief architects of the teachers' college. In this, he teamed up with Peter Mbiyu Koinange who was not only the first Kenyan to get a masters degree in Europe but also the first principal of the KATC. Jomo Kenyatta later took over from Koinange as the second principal of KATC in 1947. Kenyatta went on to become the first president of the Republic of Kenya in 1963. By the time the college was closed by the colonial administration in 1952, there were more than 500 students from various ethnic communities in East Africa who had successfully completed their studies. Nevertheless, the closures of these independent schools and churches marked a new beginning in the nationalist struggles.

On the whole, the initial accomplishment of Kikuyu independent schools and churches symbolised the success against all sorts of suppressions meted out to the Africans. It was a wake-up call to the

suppressors of the socio-religious discourses of the Africans that “we too can make our own contribution.” In the process, it cautioned against any sort of suppression of religio-cultural nationalism and patriotism.

3.3 The emergency of the *Arathi* (Seers) group

As the *Karing'a* (cultural nationalists) group was busy working out ways of establishing their Independent Schools and Churches, the *Arathi* (Seers) group emerged from within the mission churches. They were also called the *Watu wa Mungu* (literally, God’s people).¹⁹ Characteristically, they advocated a total return to the Kikuyu culture and religion, a return, which they claimed was to be headed by *Jehova* (Yahweh). They warned those who would refuse to join them that they would be killed by God’s Sword (*Ruhiu Rwa Jehova*). And to demonstrate their seriousness, they literally carried Swords, Bows, and Arrows. Their extremism could be seen in the fact that unlike the *Karing'a* group, they rejected anything associated with Europeans; and this includes, going to the Hospitals and Schools; or even wearing European Clothes. Instead, they wore hides and animal Skins, and lived in Caves. Coupled with this, they believed that they were one of the lost tribes of Israel; and that no Bullet could go through their bodies. This believe was, however, proved wrong when they had a physical confrontation with the Police, where some were shot dead while others were locked in. In addition, their movement was banned forthwith.²⁰

3.4 The emergence of the *Aroti* (dreaming) prophets

Apart from the above, the suppression of African religious discourses in pre-colonial Kenya is clearly seen in the persecution of *Aroti* prophets (1927-1948). The *Aroti* (dreamers), or “People of the Holy Spirit”, or “Prophets” began their “Holy Spirit Churches” in 1927 after the “call” in about 1918. Their adherents are loosely called *Akurinu*.²¹ Characteristically, every adherent wears a turban (white head cover) as away of acknowledging the New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. That is, rather than only the clergyman wearing a collar, all of them wore the turbans, as a mark of equality before God.

According to one of its founding leaders, Elijah Kinyanjui, the early members of the group kept “bows and arrows, and carried their quivers with them while travelling, and two-bladed swords as well, because at that time there was a widespread prophecy that a great war would soon be coming” (Kinyanjui 1973:126). He goes on to say:

In those days, then, the church of the *Akurinu*, the people of God and the prophets, experienced great tribulations and were often beaten up badly. We were thrown into prison and some of us were locked up in dungeons (read: Luke 21: 12-20; Revelation 3: 10-13; Matthew 10: 22). The members of the church of the *Akurinu* rejoiced in these tribulations and trials, and, as Jesus and his disciples did, they preached the Word and prayed to God with one heart ... In February 1934, three of our *Akurinu* were killed at Ndaragu Forest in a clash with the British Administration; they were Samuel Muinami, Joseph Ng’ang’a, and John Mung’ara. After their deaths, there arose many difficulties, and severe ones, from the Administration. The District Commissioners gave orders to the Chiefs and to the tribunal court elders, and also to the tribal police who guarded the villages, to be on the alert concerning the aims and objectives of the church of the Holy Spirit, because the *Akurinu* used to travel with Bows and Arrows in those days....For fifteen years after these three *Akurinu* were killed by the British Administration in Kenya, there came about even worse trials and temptations, but the *Akurinu* overcame them by faith and prayer. God helped them to take courage and have patience; He gave them the Holy Spirit; they increased in numbers; and those who repented of their sins and believed were baptised in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Kinyanjui 1973:126).

A recent visit to the *Akurinu* churches showed me that, though they may not be conscious of it, their way of worship is essentially African. In their leadership structures and general organisation they have creatively derived their models from the African heritage. For example, their fellowships are not leader centred, even if there are senior prophets, just as there are Angels and Archangels. There is no

clear distinction between clerics and laity, as they appear equal. In particular, the wearing of turbans by all adherents makes them equal. It contrasts with the mainline churches where only the clerics wear the collar. This appears to agree with Christ's caution that "whoever wants to be the greatest must be a servant of all" (Mark 10:44). Also, debatable issues are taken into consideration before a final decision is made and, in so doing, they try as much as possible to avoid suspicion or any form of misunderstanding. They do this by being very open to one another and appreciating everyone's contribution. This has some similarities with the African indigenous court procedure which appreciated the views of every participant and weighed the different opinions from everyone regardless of his or her social standing (Mugambi 1995:132). As noted above, it is also in the line with the New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.²² This doctrine holds that every believer is a priest because he or she can intercede for others, pray for others (James 5:13, Matthew 7:7), and can baptise during times of emergencies, among other issues.

On the whole, it is critical to appreciate that the church of *Akurinu*, which was the home of the *Aroti* (dreamers) prophets was a product of mission churches and schools. However, as time wore on, they discovered that the biblical truth, mixed with Western culture and customs, was being propagated. In 1918 and 1919, the "Lord God ... chose some to demand Independence for the land of Kenya; and secondly, he chose others by the Spirit of Jesus in God to preach and teach the news from the Word of God" (Kinyanjui 1973:124-125). Like the samples given above, the *Akurinu* movement (read churches) was initially an African quest (by some Kikuyus) for cultural and religious freedom. This shows that the general suppression of the religious discourses of the locals, in the mainline churches, drove them to look for "alternative approaches to God".

In re-addressing the extremism of the *Karing'a*, *Arathi* and *Aroti* groups, we realise that they were the products of frustrations born of poverty, religious intolerance, and socio-economic inequalities, a phenomenon that breeds turmoil and violence. This is indeed a negative characteristic of some developing nations where privileges are a preserve of few elites while the vast majority are disenfranchised in socio-religious realms. But a stable social order

cannot be built on the socio-religious marginalisation of some members of the society. Hence, the priority in any progressive society is the guaranteeing of socio-religious freedom coupled with the eradication of social and economic disparities.

4 FACTORS THAT INFORMED THE MISSIONARIES' APPROACH

In addressing the factors that informed missionaries' approach to evangelism in Kikuyuland, we need to consider some of the environmental factors that informed the European missionaries who came to Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries. Put in another way, what factors informed their theological viewpoints? And a close look at the historical background will show a number of interesting dimensions. First, since the first missionaries in Kikuyuland were primarily of British origin, they were basically informed by the events in their country at the time and this determined the attitude they had to the Africans in Central Kenya.

To begin with, one of the major theological movements that shaped the ideas and beliefs of many British missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries was the Evangelical Movement. Historically, the Evangelical Movement was started by a group of Christians at Oxford University in 1735. As a matter of fact, it evolved from the low Anglicans of the Church of England. Characteristically, evangelical theology was individualistic, selective, biased, pietistic, unreflective and to an extent, ethnocentric. Its being ethnocentric can be seen in the fact that it did not have room for cultures outside the British territories. In addition, it embraced cultural norms that often contradicted some of the British cultural norms and values, such as abstaining from drinking, dancing, sex (unless it was for procreation), smoking, possession of worldly things, secular life, and so on.²³ This rise of Evangelicalism was prompted by factors such as, reacting against the age of Enlightenment, which was seen as an age of no faith but of atheism, deism, rationalism, secularism, doubting, skepticism, and excessive materialism.

As a result, the Evangelicals reduced Christian theology to a few central principles on which devotion could be directly based. They therefore avoided theological speculations, as away of "safeguarding

the Christian heritage”, and discouraged anything that “threatened” it. In other words, they saw themselves as custodians of a precious legacy of theology “which to all intents and purposes was complete and which it was their first duty to preserve and pass on intact” (Reynolds 1976:85). Interestingly, John Wesley (1703-1791) was one of the leading members of the English Evangelical Revival Movement. Like other evangelicals, he believed in the literal interpretation of the Bible, the importance of being “born again” through Christ (cf. John 3), and strict adherence to the “great commission” (Matthew 29: 18-20). Through Wesley, his brother Charles, George Whitefield, William Booth, and Dwight L Moody who was an American Evangelist, the Evangelical Movement spread like wild fire.²⁴ It is from this background that the missionaries made their way to Kikuyuland. This evangelical theology contributed to the missionaries’ attitudes toward what they considered to be African secular life, a life that involved drinking, smoking (taking snuff), dancing, polygamy, and material possessions, to name a few.

Upon the missionaries’ arrival in Kikuyuland, they found that the Kikuyu religion had three major components of belief. First is the belief in one God (*Nga*). Second is the belief in Vital Power or Vital Force (*Hinya*). Third, is the belief in ancestors (*Maithe* or *Ngoma*). These beliefs were complimentary in that one could not believe in one and leave out the others. In particular, the belief that ancestors (*Maithe* or *Ngoma*) were ontologically higher in rank and therefore deserved respect and reverence; and that rituals and ceremonies were performed to thank them for sustaining their vital power and for protecting the living from evil and misfortunes, among other things, led the missionaries to believe that the Kikuyu did not worship the true God. Furthermore, the belief in Vital Power, which was based on the postulation that in all people and all living organisms there is a dynamic vital principle of Vital Power therefore God is the all-embracing Vital Power, made the missionaries dismiss the Kikuyu religious discourses as either vague or nonexistent.²⁵

As regards the missionary approach of working in collaboration with the colonial authorities, noted above, one can argue that most of these Protestants were influenced by the reformation theology. Martin Luther and John Calvin in particular, preached the doctrine of loyalty and submission to civil authority. Such submission, argued

Calvin, “is equally as necessary to mankind [sic] as bread and water and light and air and far more excellent” (Baron 1947:122). For Calvin, obedience to the State should not only be grounded on the fear of civil punishment but also from the fear of the Lord. In retrospect, he regarded secular princes and leaders as “vicars and lieutenants of God whom one cannot resist without resisting God himself” (Baron 1947:123). Again, Martin Luther’s view that “secular empire cannot exist without inequality in person, that some be free and some in bondage, some masters and some subjects” played a major role in justifying the suppression of African religious discourses by the British missionaries in Kikuyuland, as noted above.

In the absence of further suppressions of African religious discourses by foreign missionaries and administrators who had no room for African culture in pre-colonial Africa, African Christianity now has a chance of reconstructing itself and thereby flourishing authentically. Seen in this way, African Christianity can reverse the march “around ... Jericho ...” and re-discover that “...the walls have not collapsed”.²⁶

5 CONCLUSION

The introduction to the article began by providing an ideal way of looking at the Gospel and culture as two sides of the same coin that need not repel each other. It cited St Paul’s conversion (from Judaism to Christianity) as a prototype of conversion in African Christianity. This compares with Dr Edmund Crawford, a British missionary, who attempted to identify himself with the traditional system of the Embu people of Central Kenya and, in so doing, won their hearts. In turn, he was able to influence them from within. From there, the article went on to cite samples of brutal suppressions of African religious discourses that were conducted against the people of Central Kenya by the missionaries in cahoots with the colonial administrators. This includes the unfortunate way of handling the female circumcision saga, the persecutions of the *Aroti* prophets (1927-1948), and the banning of *Muthirigu* dance in 1930. It also described the African reaction to these suppressions, some of which turned violent while, on a positive note, some African nationalists such as Jomo Kenyatta began African Independent Schools and Churches until they (the schools) were closed in 1952.

The article was able to illustrate not only the Africans' attempts to reclaim their religious freedom(s) but also the positive contribution made by the European missionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries, especially in the provision of jobs, medical treatment and education at their mission stations. Furthermore, when the natural disasters struck the community, the missionaries proved themselves to be charitable by providing for the suffering Africans. As the article came to a close, it was able to affirm that "... the walls [read African religious consciousness] have not collapsed [and will not collapse]",²⁷ and that African Christianity has to learn from history, re-invent, and reconstruct itself authentically.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Banana, C S 1991. *Come and share: An introduction to Christian theology*. Gweru: Mambo.
- Baron, W 1947. *Modern nationalism and religion*. New York: Harper.
- Barrett, D B et al (eds.) 1973. *Kenya churches handbook: The development of Kenyan Christianity, 1498-1973*. Kisumu: Evangel.
- Beidelman, T O 1982. *Colonial evangelism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ekenga-Metuh, E 1987. The shattered microcosm: A critical survey of explanations of conversion in Africa, in Petersen, K H (ed.), *Religion, development and African identity*. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies.
- Gathogo, J 2001. *The truth about African hospitality: Is there hope for Africa?* Mombasa: The Salt.
- Gathogo, J 2007. Story-telling as a methodology in developing a theology of reconstruction. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 33(1), 155-186.
- Gitari, D 1996. *In season and out of season: Sermons to a nation*. London: Regnum.

- Karanja, J 1999. *Founding an African faith*. Nairobi: Uzima.
- Kenyatta, J 1938. *Facing Mount Kenya*. London: Heinemann.
- Kinyanjui, E 1973. The rise and persecution of the *Aroti* prophets, 1927-1948, in Barrett, David B at al (eds.), *Kenya churches handbook: The development of Kenyan Christianity, 1498-1973*. Kisumu: Evangel.
- Makoka, G & Shomag, E 2003. African customary forms of marriage: Are polygamous marriages unchristian? Available: <http://www.teenet.net/articles.htm>. Accessed: 24 August 2003.
- Mbiti, J 1969. *African religions and philosophy*. Nairobi: EAEP.
- McPherson, R 1970. *The Presbyterian Church in Kenya*. Nairobi: Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA).
- Mugambi, J N K 1995. *From liberation to reconstruction: African Christian theology after the Cold War*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd. (EAEP).
- Mugambi, J N K 1989. *African heritage and contemporary Christianity*. Nairobi: Longman.
- Muriuki, G 1974. *A history of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.
- Murray-Brown, J 1972. *Kenyatta*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Niwagila, W 1991. *From the catacomb to a self-governing church*. Hamburg: Ammerbek Bei.
- Nthamburi, Z (ed.) 1991 *From mission to church*. Nairobi: Uzima.
- Nthamburi, Z 1991. The beginning and development of Christianity in Kenya, in Nthamburi, Zablou (ed.), *From mission to church*. Nairobi: Uzima.

- Nthamburi, Z 1995. *The African Church at the crossroads*. Nairobi: Uzima.
- Oliver, R 1970. *Missionary factor in East Africa*. London: Longman.
- Petersen, K H (ed.) 1987. *Religion, development and African identity*. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies.
- Reynolds, J S 1976. *The evangelicals at Oxford 1735-1871*. Oxford: Marcham Manor.
- Richards, C G (ed.) 1960. *Count Teleki and the discovery of Lakes Rudolf and Stefanie*. London: Macmillan.
- Rosberg C G & Nottingham, J 1966. *The myth of Mau Mau*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House.
- Routledge, W S & Pease, K (eds.) 1968. *With a pre-historic people: The Akikuyu of British East Africa*. London: Frank Cass.
- Sundkler, B 1961. *Bantu prophets in South Africa*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, J V 1958. *The growth of the church in Buganda*. London: CSM.
- Temples, P 1959. *Bantu philosophy*. Paris: Presence Africaine.
- Thiong'o, N Wa 1965. *The river between*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd.
- Wachege, P N 1992. *Jesus Christ, our Muthamaki (Ideal Elder)*. Nairobi: Phoenix.
- Wanjohi, G J 1997. *The wisdom and philosophy of the Gikuyu proverbs*. Nairobi: Paulines.
- Waruiru, C 1971. *Female initiation controversy at CSM Tumutumu 1912-32*. Nairobi: University of Nairobi Library.

Welbourn, F B 1961. *East African rebels*. London: SCM.

ENDNOTES

- 1 CMS's role was re-introduction since Portuguese had tried to introduce Roman Catholic Christianity in the latter part of the 15th century in the East Coast of Africa.
- 2 It is critical to note however that some may differ with our argument on account of the fact that Paul was not converted to Christianity, in strict terms, because Christianity - at the time of his Damascus experience - simply did not exist as a distinct religion, but was rather seen as a sect of Judaism. See: James T. Tabor's *The Jesus Dynasty* 2005 (London). Nevertheless, Tabor's position is not my position as I believe that since there was no official launching of Christianity as such that ever took place, Christianity began after the resurrection of Christ when a following of Christ was evident, even though it did not call itself "Christianity". Certainly, the day of Pentecost appears like the official launching of Christianity in the early church even though no such words were used (cf. Acts 2). In the light of this, after the Damuscan conversion, I strongly hold that St Paul now served as a follower or as a subscriber to what Christ taught - hence as a Christian.
- 3 The Kikuyu live around the slopes of Mount Kenya in the present-day Central Province of Kenya. They are the largest community in Kenya today. Kikuyu is the anglicised form and pronunciation of the proper name of Gikuyu. As one of the Bantu linguistic group, they are closely related to the Kamba, Embu, Mbeere and Ameru people who also live around the slopes of Mount Kenya (for details on this, see P N Wachege, *Jesus Christ, Our Muthamaki (Ideal Elder)* (Nairobi: Phoenix Publishers, 1992).
- 4 For details on the suppression of *Itwika* (break-away) socio-religious ceremonies, see Julius Gathogo, "Story-telling as a methodology in developing a theology of reconstruction," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, Vol. XXXIII No. 1 (2007): 155-186.
- 5 For details, see John Karanja, *Founding an African Faith* (Nairobi: Uzima, 1999), 52ff.
- 6 For details, see John Karanja, *Founding an African Faith*, 52ff.
- 7 AIM was an interdenominational mission founded in 1895; and it consisted of the American Baptists and some Methodists, Presbyterians, and Anglicans.
- 8 For details, see Godfrey Muriuki, *A history of the Kikuyu*, 155-6
- 9 For details see R McPherson, *The Presbyterian Church in Kenya* (Nairobi: PCEA, 1970), 28.
- 10 Tanganyika became Tanzania following the dissolution of its union with Zanzibar in 1964.
- 11 Written interview with Professor Jesse Mugambi, 12th November 2004.
- 12 Mzee Njeru wa Kanyenje is the maternal grandfather of one of Africa's renowned scholars, Professor Jesse Mugambi.
- 13 Written interview with Jesse Mugambi on 12th November 2004.

-
- 14 Alexander was a member of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, a welfare society for Africans in Diaspora, especially in Americas, West Indies, and Caribbean Islands.
 - 15 The AOC was dominant in Kiambu district; while AIPC was dominant in Murang'a, Nyeri and the present-day Kirinyaga district.
 - 16 Information gathered through participant observation among the AIPC Churches and oral information from Mzee Diffatha Gatugi, 12th November 1998.
 - 17 Information gathered through participant observation among the AIPC Churches and oral information from Mzee Diffatha Gatugi, 12th November 1998.
 - 18 Oral information from Mzee Diffatha Gatugi, 12th November 1998.
 - 19 See Jeremy Murray-Brown, *Kenyatta* (London, 1973), 138; and Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*: 263-269.
 - 20 See Jeremy Murray-Brown, *Kenyatta*, 138; and Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*: 263-269.
 - 21 The meaning of the name *Akurinu* is obscure and still disputed. Some Aroti claim that it means "Who is the Redeemer"? More probable is the interpretation "roaring prophets" based on the OT references to the prophets roaring like lions (Isaiah 5: 29-30), that is, enthusiasts.
 - 22 We gather this from the New Testament studies and Systematic Theology, which deals with Christian doctrines.
 - 23 For details, see T O Beidelman, *Colonial evangelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 13ff.
 - 24 For details, see J S Reynolds, *The evangelicals at Oxford*.
 - 25 For details, compare Placide Temples, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959), 17-169.
 - 26 Max Warren quoted in W Niwagila, *From the catacomb to a self-governing church*, (Hamburg: Ammerbek Bei, 1991), 406.
 - 27 Max Warren quoted in W Niwagila, *From the catacomb to a self-governing church*, 406.