

## Some challenges in founding an African faith: Mutira Mission, Kenya, 1907–2012

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### *Abstract*

The history of Mutira Mission began with the arrival of the first European missionary, the Rev. A.W. McGregor of the Church Missionary Society, and his team in 1908. Despite difficulties, the missionaries significantly changed the socio-religious lifestyles of the local people. This article traces the challenges encountered in founding an African faith at Mutira Mission between 1907 and 2012, and is based largely on oral interviews and archival and library sources. In it I seek to demonstrate that the founding of an African faith, from the missionary era to the present, has successfully overcome numerous setbacks. Although Mutira Mission was officially closed in 1929, the departure of the European missionaries in fact helped the locals to own Christianity, which has exercised a positive influence on social life. While the gospel-versus-culture debate has been waged since the twentieth century, current questions are: will it break or strengthen the Christianity of the twenty-first century? Is it the main challenge in founding an African faith?

### **Introduction**

In this article, African Christianity refers to that version of the faith that developed following the introduction of Christianity into Africa, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries CE by the European missionaries. It became “African Christianity” when Africans began to evangelise one another without necessarily relying on outside elements. Over time, some elements of African culture were combined with the gospel, giving Christianity an African flavour, particularly after the Bible was translated into African languages: Christianity was propagated through African idioms, riddles and narratives and in African languages, and Africans accepted African Christianity as their new religion. However, the quest for an African faith was beset by numerous setbacks, uncertainties, misunderstandings and other difficulties. As I explain in this article, it is ironic that the challenges encountered by missionaries and the pioneer African Christians in fact furthered the quest for an African faith, as the key players were strengthened in their task.

In particular, the Rev. A.W. McGregor, a Church Missionary Society (CMS) clergyman from the United Kingdom, is credited with the establishment in 1912 of Mutira Mission Centre in Kirinyaga County in Kenya. Early in 1900, McGregor left his erstwhile missionary base, Taveta, in the coastal belt of Kenya, and sought to establish Anglican Christianity in central Kenya. Upon his arrival in central Kenya, McGregor and his team founded a number of new mission centres and even settled briefly in some of them before asking the bishop of the then Mombasa Anglican diocese to send a resident clergy for them; thus Kabete was founded in 1900, Weithaga in 1904, and both Kahuhia and Tumu Tumu in 1906 (the latter was subsequently taken over by Presbyterians). Mutira was the next to be founded, after Tumu Tumu, in 1907–1908. In preparation to establishing Mutira Mission Centre, McGregor first met the local chief, Njega wa Gioko of the Ndia sub-group of the Kikuyu nation, at his Kiamuthambi office in 1907. In turn, Chief Gioko allowed him to proceed with his plans, and subsequently directed him to move northwards to Mutira. By then, McGregor had already left Kabete and had settled at Weithaga Mission Centre, bordering Mutira Mission Centre.

McGregor was in the habit of building houses (constructed of wattle and daub) for his successor-clergy rather than leaving them to fend for themselves. For example, before McGregor left Kabete, after three years, to accept the assignment at the so-called Kenya Mission, referring to the area that comprised Murang’a, Nyeri, and the Trans-Tana Embu districts (now counties), he built his own house and one for the Rev. H. Leakey (nicknamed “Giteru” by the locals owing to his long beard) and family. The Leakeys were to join him later, and they served Kabete from 1902 to 1930.<sup>1</sup> Under McGregor’s supervision a church building was also constructed at Mutira (1911–1912). The building also served as a school under the first European teacher/missionary, the Rev. Brandon Laight, nicknamed “Kamonde”, who was posted there at the end of 1912. Laight, who had come as a CMS missionary, encouraged the locals to embrace western education; to demonstrate this, he began teaching from his house. The Rev. Herbert Butcher took over from him in 1919; he, in turn, was replaced by Rev. Hillard in 1927. After the infamous Subukia earthquake of 1928, no further European missionaries were posted to Mutira. However, although the mission centre was declared closed in 1929, the local African leadership, under Thomas Meero and Johana Njumbi,

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Mwangi et al. *A Century of God’s Household: Diocese of Mt. Kenya South 1900–2000* (Nairobi: Uzima), 15.

continued with the mission work despite some early challenges that will be considered in this article. They on occasion invited the European clergy from neighbouring missionary centres such as Kigari and Kabare to conduct baptisms or to solemnise marriages. A century after the construction of the single church building in 1911–1912, the area boasted over 1 000 buildings, including church halls, dispensaries and guesthouses; 102 parishes; 221 congregations; 213 priests and church workers and about 70 000 Anglican Christians.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Mutira Mission had grown, by 2011, from a mere mission centre to about 7 archdeaconries, namely Mutira, Kerugoya Cathedral, Kiandangae, Thiba, Wang'uru (though not all parishes were in the old Mutira parish/mission) and Karaba Archdeaconry, which is in Mbeere Anglican Diocese in Embu County. Karaba Archdeaconry has both Gategi Deanery, comprising Gategi, Makima, and Riakanau parishes, and Makutano Deanery, which in turn has Makutano, Karaba, and Wango parishes.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenal growth was not unmarred by problems, however.

### **Some contributing factors and difficulties**

#### *Missionary zeal amidst uncertainties*

The successful founding of Mutira Mission despite a number of difficulties can be attributed to a range of factors. First, the establishment of Anglican mission stations, such as Mutira, in the Mount Kenya region was made possible by missionary zeal in spite of uncertainties. In particular, Bishop Peel made several journeys from Mombasa to Nairobi; in both January and June 1900, he visited Nairobi with the specific aim of obtaining a site and making preliminary arrangements for establishing a mission centre. Subsequently, he encouraged the local CMS administrative body to consider this, and as a result, a missionary conference was held on 18 July 1900. The resolutions of the meeting were clear: add Fort Smith (Kikuyu) and Machakos to the eleven already existing CMS missionary districts in British East Africa (Kenya).<sup>4</sup> It is from there that the Rev. A.W. McGregor was sent out as a pioneer missionary worker in Central Kenya, in particular Kabete in 1900.

#### *Attack by wild animals*

The passion of the missionaries to evangelise “the marginals” is a key factor contributing to the founding of Mutira Mission. McGregor, for instance, escaped death for the first time when he was forced to sleep under a tree after a tent failed during his ministerial duties at Taveta. Disturbed by something touching his face, McGregor brushed away what he took to be a twig, only to find that it was a deadly black snake some four feet long. He also escaped death from a wounded leopard, but not before it had mauled his hand. As a result, the Gikuyu nicknamed him “Gakono” (“shortened hand”).<sup>5</sup>

#### *Resistance on the part of the locals*

As the Rev. A.W. McGregor set out to establish Mutira Mission, his ambitious plans were dogged by serious setbacks. One was the danger of wild animals such as hyenas, since Mutira was situated on the slopes of Mount Kenya (then called Mount Kirinyaga by the locals). Moreover, McGregor's team met with considerable resistance from the local Ithimbwi clan, who did not want their 15 acres of land to be taken away by the “foreigners” for the purposes of building a school (which would take up 12 acres) and church (which would require 3 acres). In general, Christianity as propounded by the missionaries was viewed with suspicion in the area. The traditional healers were against the missionaries, as they saw them as a threat to their work. Further, most people were reluctant to abandon their cultural and religious practices. Consequently the missionaries, under McGregor, left for Kabare and Kigari-Embu between 1908 and 1909 and had established the respective stations by 1910. It was only at the end of 1911 that the deal was settled.

At Mutira Mission, the locals, unlike those at neighbouring stations, initially rejected anything brought by the incoming missionaries as “witchcraft, poison or undeserving things from the whiteman”. Any gestures made by the missionaries were rejected outright for some time – hence the delay in establishing a missionary centre. This was in contrast with the situation at Kabare, Weithaga and Kigari, where the missionaries' mechanical gadgets attracted huge crowds. In particular, Douglas Hooper and Edmund Crawford at Kabare, in Kirinyaga County, made use of their gramophones (known locally as “Columbia” after their make) to draw the locals, who saw them as new magic. At Weithaga Mission Station, in Murang'a District, McGregor put his lantern slides to similar use. Also, the missionaries' offer of sugar, salt, money, and clothes to school pupils proved attractive,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ackkenya.org/dioceses/kirinyaga.html> (accessed October 2, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ackkenya.org/dioceses/mbeere.html> (accessed October 2, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Mwangi et al., 10.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with the Rev. Canon John Mararo, Cool Breeze Hotel, Mombasa, 11 November 2010.

which was not the case at Mutira.<sup>6</sup> This did not, however, mean that Christianity won genuine adherents at this stage.

Despite opposition by the locals, Mutira Mission was established by the end of 1912. A primary school, a bookshop<sup>7</sup> and a dispensary followed. Unfortunately the dispensary building was damaged when lightning struck a tree, which fell on it, and the church was financially unable to repair it. Consequently, in 1967 the dispensary was transferred to Kagumo Town, where it was run by the County Council of Kirinyaga.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Distorted information about the local people*

At times, the missionaries misunderstood the socio-religious backgrounds of the local people. For instance, E. May Crawford, wife of Dr Crawford, a missionary doctor among the Embu, does not appear to have appreciated that the Ndia people (who occupy the area in which Mutira is situated) are a sub-group of the larger Kikuyu community. She treated them as a group separate from but related to the Embu, Chuka, Meru and Kikuyu ethnic groups. In her book *By the Equator's Snowy Peak: a record of medical missionary work and travel in British East Africa* of 1913, she describes the Chuka people, who are a Meru sub-group, thus:

The dialect of these interesting people differs considerably from that of the Kikuyu and Embu tribes, so that it was not always easy to make ourselves understood. The cast of countenance is also somewhat distinctive, with an unusual width between the eyes. Clothing is reduced to a minimum! Goatskins, beads and red clay, all play their part as with most of the barbarous tribes of Africa; but many of the men and women seem to attempt no other covering than a frill of banana leaves round the waist. American cotton and blankets are, however, being gradually introduced amongst the male portion of the community. They appear to be quite devoid of the scruples of their Kikuyu and Embu neighbours with regard to food, and will eat almost any kind of meat that comes in their way, even that of the hyena, which is reckoned most unclean by the Akikuyu, who consider it ceremonially defiling to touch any meat except beef or mutton, even a domestic fowl or a partridge being absolutely tabooed!<sup>9</sup>

While Mrs Crawford was correct in stating that various communities around the slopes of Mount Kenya speak different dialects, she was not correct in describing the Chuka people, who are a sub-group of the larger Meru community, as an independent ethnic group in the way that the Embu and Kikuyu are. She was equally incorrect in describing the Ndia people as independent from the Embu and the Kikuyu. Like the Mathira, Tetu, Kabete and other sub-groups of the Kikuyu ethnic group, the Ndia people, despite their accents and dialects, are culturally sons and daughters of the legendary Gikuyu and his wife Mumbi, who are said to have founded the Kikuyu community after breaking away from other Bantu linguistic groupings. Classifying people on the basis of accents and dialects, as opposed to their cultural settings, is misleading and inaccurate. Further, Mrs Crawford describes Chief Gutu wa Kibetu of the Gichugu sub-group of the Kikuyu community living alongside the Ndia people in Kirinyaga County, as “the powerful chief of the Ndia tribe”.<sup>10</sup> While Njega wa Gioko ruled Ndia as paramount chief from 1901 to 1947, Gutu was the leader of the Gichugu people; both sub-groups have dominated Kirinyaga County up to the present. While Mutira Mission is located in Ndia, Kabare mission, which was established in 1910, is in Gichugu.

My interviews with the Reverends Japhet Katheranya and Naftali Mwenda Mburugu, of the greater Meru region, on 29 September 2010 revealed that the Chuka would not have eaten all kinds of meat, including that of the dreaded hyena, as Mrs Crawford wrote. In those days, the communities living around the slopes of Mount Kenya did not bury their dead, instead placing the bodies in the forest, where they were consumed by hyenas. In consequence, the hyena was hated by the Meru (including the Chuka), Embu, Mbeere, Tharaka, Kikuyu and other Bantu linguistic groups. The hyena is often featured in African oral narratives, epitomising greed, abomination, stupidity, irrationality and ill-intent. The Chuka people may have been called hyena eaters by the rival ethnic group in their locality, and it may have been this stereotype, articulated by those who competed with the Chuka for local resources such as grazing land and hunting grounds, that Mrs Crawford accepted as the truth when she arrived in 1904 in what is today Kenya.

<sup>6</sup> John Karanja, *Founding an African Faith*, (Nairobi: Uzima), 54.

<sup>7</sup> In 1935, Mark Kangi Ngure was employed as sales assistant in the bookshop. In 1954 the building that had housed the bookshop collapsed and was converted into a vicarage, a function it fulfilled until 1999, when a new vicarage was completed. The old bookshop was by 2012 part of the renovated Mutira dispensary, which was to become a nursing home. Since 2006, the dispensary has expanded its services and a maternity wing has been under construction.

<sup>8</sup> In 1999 the church reestablished it on the same site. By 2012, plans to convert it to a hospital were in the pipeline.

<sup>9</sup> E. May Crawford, *By The Equator's Snowy Peak: A Record of Medical Missionary Work and Travel in British East Africa*, (London: Church Missionary Society, 1913), 142–143.

<sup>10</sup> Crawford, 150.

In his research, which culminated in a PhD from the University of London in 1969 and the subsequent publication of the book *A history of the Kikuyu, 1500–1900* in 1974, Godfrey Muriuki covered Nyeri (Gaki) – his homeland, Murang’a (Metumi) and Kiambu (Kabete). He did not visit Ndia or Kirinyaga County (then Kirinyaga District) to investigate the origin of the Ndia and Gichugu sub-groups of the larger Kikuyu nation. Possibly owing to established stereotypes, he may have felt it unnecessary to focus on them, since they owe their origin to the Kamba, whereas his area of research was the Kikuyu community. He writes:

The Maasai were also the neighbours of the Kikuyu to the West ... There were other neighbours besides the Maasai. The country lying to the east of Kikuyuland is inhabited by their cousins – the Meru to the north-east; the Ndia, Gicugu, Mbeere and Embu to the east; and to the south-east, the Kamba with whom the Kikuyu are especially closely related.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, in wrongly portraying the Ndia and Gicugu as the eastern neighbours of the Kikuyu, Muriuki was only quoting the early European writers Middleton and Kershaw,<sup>12</sup> who had a distorted version of the information, just as Mrs Crawford had with regard to the Chuka sub-group of the Meru nation. The early European writers, explorers, missionaries and anthropologists tended to draw hasty conclusions about the African people, possibly on account of communication barriers. They therefore classified ethnic groupings simply by listening to accents and dialects rather than considering aspects such as culture and genealogies. The Ndia and Gicugu dialects are largely influenced by their cousin-neighbours such as the Mbeere, Embu, Meru and, to some extent, the Kamba. This does not make them less or more Kikuyu. Like the rest of the Agikuyu, the Ndia people know their genealogies through oral literature, according to which they are the sons and daughters of mother Mumbi and father Gikuyu. Like the rest of the Kikuyu, they have nine clans.

### *Fear of the unknown*

Being the first Europeans to settle there, Rev. and Mrs Laight initially experienced difficulties relating to housing, medical care, language and cultural barriers. This was similar to the situation at the neighbouring missionary centre of Kabare, where the school, which initially enrolled 30 pupils in 1910, saw its attendance steadily decrease because of rumours that schoolboys who continued to read would never be allowed to eat cold food or to marry, that they would be given the nickname *Mwalimu* (“teacher”), and that eventually they would not be productive in communal African society.<sup>13</sup>

Over time, the Laights were able to carry out educational, medical and pastoral work at Mutira. It took some time to build a house, a church and a dispensary, but by 1913, these had been completed. Subsequently, Rev. Laight was pleased to report to his senior, Bishop Peel and the Diocesan Synod, that there were good congregations each Sunday.<sup>14</sup>

Fear of the unknown as a significant obstacle to founding an African faith in the locality was something experienced by both the Europeans and the Africans. However, the three European clergymen who served Mutira Mission, namely Laight, Butcher and Hillard, used unfamiliar objects to arouse the interest of the locals in the hopes of thus attracting them to Christianity. On occasion, the locals were given sugar, salt and other household goods, which they rejected as “whiteman’s poison”. At both Kabare and Weithaga, the local people were introduced to the marvels of a pressure lamp, with a measure of success, but in Mutira, little was achieved through such gestures.

### *Droughts and famine*

During the Rev. (later Canon) Herbert J. Butcher’s stewardship, Mutira and the entire population of the larger Ndia experienced two severe droughts, one in 1921 and the other in 1924, which posed a serious threat to both humans and animals. Traditional healers and the rainmakers of the Ethaga clan unsuccessfully conducted rituals to induce rain; Butcher, however, on both occasions successfully prayed for the drought to break. At the time of the first drought, the local chief, Nguru, who was in favour of the work of the missionaries, asked him to pray for rain. Butcher’s prayer was followed by a downpour three hours later. This provided Chief Nguru and the rest of the local population with confirmation that the God of Christendom was “real”, and awakened the interest of the local people in Butcher’s religion. The situation earned Christianity some credibility, and locals could now look forward to more “miracles”. A “conversion boom” followed, as large numbers of people streamed to Mutira Mission. This included some traditional healers, who gave up their practice and surrendered their

<sup>11</sup> Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500–1900* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1974), 29.

<sup>12</sup> See J. Middleton and G. Kershaw, *The Kikuyu and Kamba, Ethnographic Survey of Africa* (London, 1965).

<sup>13</sup> Keith Cole, *The Cross Over Mount Kenya: A Short History of the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Mount Kenya (1900–1970)* (Melbourne: Ridley College, 1970), 60.

<sup>14</sup> Cole, 63.

divining equipment to be burnt.<sup>15</sup> Over time, Butcher was looked upon as a formidable shaman representing a more powerful religion than the local one.

In 1918 Mutira Primary School was temporarily closed because of the great famine in the area. The school's initial enrolment was about 14 pupils at the beginning of 1915. Thomas Meero, the African missionary who worked hand in hand with the European missionaries of the twentieth century, would be overjoyed to see the current developments in the twenty-first century. Canon Johana Njumbi, who tirelessly promoted education, would be equally proud to see how many schools there are currently throughout Mbeere (part of Embu County), Ndia and Kirinyaga Central (parts of Kirinyaga County) – an area in which there was only one school by 1920. By 2012, there were well over 400 primary and secondary schools in the old Mutira pastorate, comprising some parts of Embu and Kirinyaga counties, that is, about 300 primary schools and about 150 secondary schools, while Central Kenya boasted 2 475 primary schools alone. Clearly, despite the droughts and famines that have plagued the area from time to time, the work of the pioneer missionary educators has borne fruit.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from enduring droughts and famines, Mutira Mission was severely tested during the war of political emergence, particularly after a state of emergency was declared by the colonial governor, Sir Evelyn Baring, on 20 October 1952. On 24 August 1952, the Kenyan government had imposed a curfew in three districts on the outskirts of Nairobi where gangs of arsonists, believed to be members of the Mau Mau (freedom fighters), had been setting fires to homes of Africans who allegedly refused to take the Mau Mau oath. In 1953 Reuben Kinyua Kaara, the local Mutira nurse and laboratory technician, was killed by young members of the Mau Mau for refusing to give out drugs and refusing to take the oath. In 1954, at Kangai, Mwea, in the southern part of Mutira, the first church was burnt down by Mau Mau youths, forcing worshippers to retreat to their homes for worship, as in the case of the early church. Only in June 1964 was work on the Ascension of Our Lord Church in Kangai undertaken, and the church was finally dedicated by the then rural dean, the Rev. Esborn Ngaruiya (later Assistant Bishop of Mount Kenya South), in 1968.

### *Coercion*

While Butcher earned a reputation as a baptist, Hillard did so for conducting church marriages. Alice Wakanugu Mwari wa Gatangi, wife of Michael Karuga, recalls that Hillard, who was nicknamed “Gikubia” (meaning “big hat”), was a larger-than-life figure. In an interview conducted on 10 March 2010, Alice recounted that Hillard, who replaced Butcher in 1927, will be remembered for forcing Africans to attend church services on Sundays. During those days, it was common practice for Africans to work on Sundays, as they viewed all days as equal working days. Hillard, however, declared that this was to be stopped. Alice told how he would walk around the farms in the vicinity of the church and literally whip men and women he found working on a Sunday. Few dared resist, as he was always armed with a gun. Wails and screams were commonly heard on Sundays, as people were made to attend church services.

### *The 1928 Subukia earthquake*

On 7 January 1928, a severe earthquake shook Mutira and the entire Mount Kenya region, causing extensive damage to the two mission houses, the church, the school, and the dispensary. As a result, the missionaries and their assistants were forced to sleep in tents for a period of six months. Rev. and Mrs Hillard had to move to the neighbouring Kabare Mission Centre. Rev. Hillard only returned to Mutira in June 1928, and built the current house, currently the parish office.<sup>17</sup>

In their book, *Geosciences and the Environment*, Isaac O. Nyambok and Theophilus C. Davies argue that the Subukia earthquake of 1928 is the most powerful earthquake reported from Kenya,<sup>18</sup> registering 7.1 on the Richter scale. Its epicentre was along the Laikipia Escarpment to the east of Lake Bogoria (Hannington). The shock was severe, fissures opened, and there were landslides and changes in river flow. Buildings were

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Karanja's interview with an eye witness, Canon Johana Njumbi, 19 April 1991. John Karanja, *Founding an African Faith* (Nairobi: Uzima, 1999), 34. Other interviewees included Mariko Kangi (26 April 1991), Gerishon Matiti (16 May 1991), and Joshua Wagiti (16 July 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Leading secondary schools in the old Mutira pastorate include Wachoro, Karaba Boys, Gategi Girls, and Makima secondary schools in Mbeere District; while in the upper part of Mutira pastorate, leading secondary schools include: Mutira Girls, Kerugoya Girls, Kerugoya Boys, Kamuiru Boys, Baricho Boys, Njega, Kabonge, Karoti, Kiburu, Getuya and the recently launched Canon Njumbi Mutira Mixed Secondary schools. There are countless computer colleges and beauty colleges in addition to Kirinyaga Teachers College, Hossana Institute, TES College, AHITI Ndongba-Kutus, Beker Institute of Professional Studies, and Sagana Technical Institute. Kirinyaga Technical Institute has been made a university college of the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agricultural Technology (JKUAT).

<sup>17</sup> CPK Mutira Parish, *History of Mutira Parish*, 1981, Unpublished material, Kerugoya.

<sup>18</sup> Isaac O. Nyambok and Theophilus C. Davies, *Geosciences and the Environment* (Nairobi: Nairobi University Press, 1993), 36. Fortunately, the Subukia earthquake took place when the district was still sparsely populated and towns such as Nakuru were quite small. In a densely populated and highly built area, an earthquake of magnitude 7.1 is likely to do far greater damage and even cause loss of life.

extensively damaged over a wide area in the Subukia and Solai valleys, while at Mutira, the European missionary buildings were completely destroyed. The earthquake was felt as far away as Mombasa and Taveta.

As a result, there was no resident European missionary priest at Mutira from 1929 onwards. Consultation of the Nairobi national archive shows that Mutira Mission was officially closed in 1929, though in reality it continued under African lay leadership. For some years subsequently, the resident missionary at Kabare and Kigari visited Mutira Mission Centre, taking overall responsibility for all ecclesiastical duties. The clergy who visited Mutira during this period to offer pastoral care included the Rev. H.J. Church (1933–1943); the Rev. Canon Thomas Francis Cecil Bewes (1935–1937), who translated the book of Ecclesiastes into the local language in 1940; the Rev. L.J. Beecher (1937–1939); and the Rev. John Comely, who served Mutira from Kigari, Embu. The absence of a resident European missionary after the 1928 earthquake was a major setback to the area, as the missionary work slowed and was carried out under difficult circumstances. Without finance, previously supplied by the CMS, the local African leadership had a very difficult time.

#### *The thin line between coloniser and missionary*

As time wore on, the locals could not tell the difference between the European coloniser and the European missionary, as they appeared to work as a team. Thus the locals coined a slogan, *Gutiri muthungu na mubia*: “There is no real difference between a white missionary and a white coloniser.” Indeed, the missionaries worked hand in hand with the Protectorate (later colonial) government to ensure the smooth running of their missions. After the initial period of conquest, the Protectorate government appointed African chiefs and headmen to assist in local administration. These appointees were made responsible for maintaining public order, recruiting “communal labour”, hearing and determining petty native cases and, for a brief period between 1902 and 1910, collecting hut tax. This was a new means introduced by the Protectorate government to collect revenue: a sum of two rupees was payable annually by the occupier of any hut. This introduction of a monetary economy and hut tax, plus land alienation in Kikuyuland, forced most men to leave their homes in search of employment. The mission stations offered employment opportunities, and as a result, some people converted to Christianity as a way of guaranteeing themselves a job,<sup>19</sup> as this was their only way of improving their lot. The chiefs appointed by the British administrators therefore owed their allegiance to the Protectorate rather than Kikuyu society. At Mutira, the assistant chief, Ndegwa wa Kimere, supported missionary work in order to protect his job, as he had seen his immediate predecessor, Munge wa Ndaruru, dismissed through the influence of Brandon Laight. The immediate cause of Munge’s dismissal was in fact his refusal to provide a passageway for the missionary’s bicycle, and Laight recommended Ndegwa wa Kimere to the local district commissioner (DC). Ndegwa was keen on recruiting schoolchildren, and one of those recruited was Johana Njumbi, who later became the first African Anglican priest from Ndia Division of what is today Kirinyaga County. The Rev. Canon Johana Njumbi, as he later became, first attended school in 1914 after Ndegwa had persuaded his father to send a boy for instruction at the mission.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For details, see Karanja, 52ff.

<sup>20</sup> For details, see Karanja, 52ff.

### *Traditional versus modern medicine*

Although the first missionary dispensary was built as early as 1913, a tug-of-war continued between traditional and modern medicine. The missionary doctors could not compete with the traditional medical practitioners, particularly when it came to warding off misfortune – in other words, dealing with the metaphysical world. As a result, most Christians from Mutira Mission continued to secretly consult the traditional practitioners (*andugo*), especially during times of crisis<sup>21</sup> – a testament to the resilience of the African cultural and religious heritage. Dissatisfied Christians still choose to consult the traditional oracles occasionally, particularly in difficult times, although they do not advertise the fact.

### *Violence and tension*

At Mutira Mission Centre, one ugly incident, however, remains unforgotten: on this occasion the DC's emissary was badly assaulted by Christians (*athomi*) who had attended catechism classes in 1916. According to an eye witness, Canon Johana Njumbi, an emissary had been sent to call Thomas Meero, the head of the *athomi* (enlightened and schooled) community at Mutira. Accompanied by a number of retainers of the local chief, the messenger sought to accomplish his mission by disrupting a Sunday morning service which Meero was conducting. This angered the congregation, which turned on the messenger and those accompanying him. Following this incident, seven of the *athomi* were arrested and locked up, raising fears that Christian persecutions were in the offing. Luckily, Edmund Crawford, the resident missionary at Kabare, who was left in charge of Mutira, followed up on the matter and secured their release from prison. They were nevertheless fined as punishment for the alleged assaults.<sup>22</sup>

### *Increased sexual immorality in 1930s*

The 1930s saw increased sexual immorality among the youth, a situation that was caused by the collapse of cultural sanctions and the sharp rise in bride price. Certainly, the dissolving of the old social order brought about a relaxation of earlier restrictions on sexual activity among the youth. Young men engaged in sexual promiscuity as they postponed their marriages so as to first work hard and acquire enough wealth in the form of livestock and money as dowry. This trend upset both elders and the missionaries. The fact that this was also a period of devolution (where the church was moving faster to the grassroots), revival and consolidation did not help matters. As a stop gap measure, the missionaries encouraged sex education in the schools that they sponsored, and took disciplinary measures against those of their adherents who were found guilty of promiscuity, though this remained a thorn in the flesh.<sup>23</sup>

Moral degeneration has been a problem in Africa since Christianity was introduced in the twentieth century. African Christianity is facing real moral issues that must be attended to quickly. As David Wells has remarked concerning the American moral state: "Today, the Church finds itself in the midst of a culture whose moral fabric is rotting and whose spirit is troubled."<sup>24</sup> As Hannah Kinoti observes, "contemporary African society is lamenting a moral world fallen apart".<sup>25</sup> This is also captured in *Things fall apart*, in which Chinua Achebe<sup>26</sup> quotes the following powerful lines from a poem by William Butler Yeats:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.<sup>27</sup>

In attempting to overcome this challenge it is critical to appreciate that the test of African morality lies in locating our African religious heritage, so that we live our Christian life justly. A rewarding way forward is for the church to recover and reiterate what was good in traditional African culture. The belief that all African traditional beliefs and practices were pagan and evil must be rejected, as no cultural and/or religious heritage is either satanic or angelic. In the words of Jesse Mugambi:

The modern Christian missionary enterprise has assumed, in general, that the culture and ethics of the missionary is "Christian" and "good", whereas that of the prospective converts is "non-

<sup>21</sup> Karanja, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Karanja, 114: interview with Canon Johana Njumbi, 19 April 1991.

<sup>23</sup> Karanja, 241–242.

<sup>24</sup> David Wells, *Losing our Virtue: Why the Church must Recover its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 179.

<sup>25</sup> Hannah Wangeci Kinoti, "African Morality: Past and Present," in *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity*, ed. J.N.K. Mugambi and A. Nasimiyu-Wasike (Nairobi: Acton, 1999), 75.

<sup>26</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London, Heinemann, 1958).

<sup>27</sup> William Butler Yeats, 1921 quoted in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, ed. D. Drakes (London, Penguin, 1991).

Christian” and “evil”. Missionary expansion has thus been rationalized in terms of going out to convert those of different cultures and religions so that they might become like the missionary.<sup>28</sup>

Clearly, these so-called evil practices or African beliefs were merely replaced by alien Western beliefs, which did not find a dwelling in the African soul. Generally, Christianity in tropical Africa needs to be cooked in an African pot, the latter representing “the African worldview, traditions, anthropology, and indeed African epistemology which ... form the substratum of the faith and life of the Christians in Africa”.<sup>29</sup> This drives us to strive for authentic Christianity at Mutira Mission and in the rest of tropical Africa, and to adopt a more pragmatic approach in response to the moral question.

### *Corruption*

As in the rest of tropical Africa, in Kenya complaints about corruption and other forms of misuse of public resources are made from time to time. In the main, corruption accelerates crime, negatively affects investment, hinders growth in society, and drains the national or county budget. At county level it can be seen in the misuse of the Constituency Development Fund (CDF)). In a nutshell, leaders who ignore merit, practise nepotism and embezzle public funds undermine the sovereignty of Kenya as a nation. An illustration is provided by American scholar Jean Davison, who, on visiting Kenya, encountered tea protests, as farmers claimed that they were being short-changed. She says:

In August 1992 when I visited Mutira, smallholders were striking – refusing to pick their tea – because they realised only Ksh. 2. 50 per kilo, while the final auction price for export tea was Ksh 28 per kilogram. Women wondered who was pocketing the difference and blamed the problem on the management of the Kenya Tea Development Authority (KTDA, a parastatal) and the state. In addition there was a bottleneck in the processing of tea leaves, as the outdated equipment in the Kanaita factory was not keeping up with smallholder producers’ output. The producer/pickers refused to pick tea over a three-month period (between May and July 1992), which left the once even carpets of green tea looking scruffy and neglected. The conflict between growers and KTDA was resolved in August 1992 with growers earning between Ksh 4 and Ksh 5 per kilogram. The pickers went back to work. However, there was a great backlog at local weighing stations. The way the smallholder producers/pickers perceived the problem was that KTDA was punishing smallholders for the strike by making the pickers wait nearly all night for their tea to be weighed, sorted, and collected for transport to a tea factory. By 1994 when I returned to Mutira the tea fields once again were even carpets of emerald green. Producers were getting roughly Ksh 4. 50 per kilo. Women maintained that the opening of the new factory at Kiamaina [the Mununga Tea Factory] in late 1993 had helped to solve the processing bottleneck that was in evidence in 1992.<sup>30</sup>

The price of coffee, a cash crop once described as “black gold”, has fallen in Mutira and Kirinyaga County generally since 1987. The downward trend in coffee production has also been experienced in the rest of Kenya. According to the Kenya Central Bureau of Statistics in 1991, the overall producer price had been Ksh 3, 844 per hundred kilograms of coffee in 1984. By 1986, this had risen to a high of Ksh 5, 020 for the same quantity. By 1987, however, the price had dropped to Ksh 3, 662. In 1988 and 1989, the price went down again to Ksh 3, 636 per hundred kilograms, lower than it had been in 1984. By 1990, some farmers had already started uprooting their coffee plants, replacing them with food crops such as maize, bananas and French beans. This downward trend has continued through to 2012. One wonders whether there is hope for the recovery of this crop, which helped parents put their children through high school and college during the 1960s, 70s and 80s

### **The Rev. Canon Jason Minja Mwai (1928–2008)**

The Rev. Jason Minja Mwai is the third member of the indigenous clergy to serve in the old Mutira pastorate, the first two being the Rev. Canon Johana Njumbi Kamuku (1886–1991), and the Rev. Paul Kibuti (1918–1996). Minja, as he was commonly known, was born in 1928 in the Kiandangae area of Ndia Division of Kirinyaga County. He received his primary school education at Kiandangae, where he sat for his Kenya African Primary Education (KAPE) school certificate in 1950s. In those days, at the height of British colonialism, the colour bar governed social and educational matters. There were three classifications of education offered in the Kenya colony, namely European education, Asian education and African education – hence KAPE. European

<sup>28</sup> Jesse N.K. Mugambi, “The Problem of Teaching Ethics in African Christianity,” in *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity*, ed. J.N.K. Mugambi and A. Nasimiyu-Wasike (Nairobi: Acton, 1999), 14.

<sup>29</sup> K. Fiedler et al., “Theology Cooked in an African Pot,” *ATISCA Bulletin* (1998), 2.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Davison, *Voices from Mutira: Change in the Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women, 1910–1995* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1966), 26.



education was viewed as superior to Asian education, which in turn was seen to be superior to African education.

After studying at Kiandangae Primary School, Jason Minja attended McGregor Theological College, Weithaga, in the present-day Murang'a County, from 1960 to 1961. Here, he prepared for ordained church ministry for two years. However, he was not immediately ordained after successfully completing his studies at McGregor College in 1961 because the elders of Kiandangae parish apparently petitioned higher offices of the church, arguing that he was unfit for sacred ministry because his parents were adherents of African indigenous religion, and were said to prepare the thick traditional brew popularly called *Marwa*. It is sobering to learn that in those days, a person's calling to sacred ministry could be delayed or prevented altogether by one's parentage, family or by communal interests.

Fortunately one of the church elders, Mr Douglas Kanja, broke ranks and supported Minja's ordination. He went to petition Bishop Obadiah Kariuki of Mount Kenya, as Kirinyaga was then part of the larger Mount Kenya Diocese. Kanja explained that the Kirinyaga side of the diocese was disadvantaged or even discriminated against with regard to the number of local clergy. He explained that Minja could not be blamed for his parents' rejection of Christianity in favour of African religion. He further argued that the serving evangelists and clergy were in fact to blame for failing to evangelise and thereby convert Minja's parents. Why not congratulate Minja for defying his parents and accepting the God of Christendom rather than blaming him for their "mistakes"? Could they not also decide for themselves to become Christians? And why had the church not prepared Minja psychologically in advance, during his training, warning him that his salvation and Christian ministry were dependent on the faith, or lack thereof, of his parents? How can a person be saved and truly accept the God of Christendom without any strings attached? he asked the attentive Bishop.<sup>31</sup> He also put it to the bishop that by failing to ordain Minja and make him a diocesan worker, the church would be losing money, as a considerable sum had already been spent on his education. "Why burn lots of money in training Minja and then tell him, 'look, your parents have sinned ..., and so, you have also sinned, probably by extension?'" he asked.

Bishop Kariuki was greatly impressed by these arguments, and wondered why the elders who were opposing Minja's ordination did not share these views. Knowing that the debate about Minja's case could place the church in an untenable position, Bishop Kariuki invoked his powers as the duly elected bishop and decreed: "there will be no more debate; Minja will be ordained for according to a common Kikuyu proverb, a 'hardworking child does not lack adoptive parents.'" On 17 December 1961, Kariuki made him an Anglican deacon.

Deacons in the Anglican church are not ordained; rather, they are made. In other words, the office of deacon is the first important step towards ordination, as the deacon is allowed to wear a clerical shirt and collar. He or she is addressed as Reverend, and in consequence lay people may find it difficult to differentiate between an Anglican deacon and a full priest. The deacon is, however, limited in his or her duties. For instance, he or she can only baptise children, cannot solemnise weddings, and in some cases, cannot be in charge of a parish. The Anglican constitution, however, empowers the bishop to use his or her discretion to allow a deacon to carry out some of the above-mentioned duties, particularly if there is a shortage of ordained clergy in a diocese.

On 2 December 1962 Rev. Minja was ordained as a full priest, and elevated to the position of parish vicar in January 1963. From 1963 to 2006, during which time he was a church minister, he served in parishes of Kiandangae; Kagaari; Kiambaa; Kiru; Mutira; Ngirambu; Iyeyo; Moyale; Thiba; Karaba; Marsabit; Kiine; Karumandi; Kiaga; and Kagio, among other places. In the 1980s he was made a Canon by Bishop Gitari. Although born at Kiandangae, north west of Kirinyaga, he settled at Ciagini in Mwea Division in the southern part of Kirinyaga County. By the time of his death in 2008, Minja had played his part exceedingly well, displaying high levels of forbearance and maturity to his parishioners. Even though some of his critics accuse him of lacking in creativity, Minja's ability to accommodate divergent views, some of which he did not agree with, shows that the African church of the twenty-first century has something to learn from him. Minja had the generosity of spirit to forgive the elders who sought to block him from sacred ministry in the 1960s, and some are reported to have become his ministerial confidants. Minja's life story demonstrates some of the difficulties associated with establishing an African faith, where the ordination of pioneer African clergy could be jeopardised by the faith of one's parents. Certainly, a lot has changed since then.

## Conclusion

The article began by locating Mutira Mission, established in the early twentieth century, in Kirinyaga County in Kenya. I went on to discuss some of the problems encountered in the founding of an African faith. I also provided an overview of the life of the Rev. Canon Jason Minja Mwai as a further illustration of the difficulties attendant on the establishment of an African faith, particularly with regard to the ordination of indigenous clergy. Despite the challenges, however, an African faith was founded, and African Christianity was born. The

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with the Rev. Symon M. Kigundu at Gathuthi-ini, 27 October 2010.

challenge for African theologians in the twenty-first century is to ensure that the dialogue between gospel and culture is encouraged rather than suppressed as we strive for an authentic African Christianity that seeks to overcome clannism, tribalism, corruption and other retrogressive forces.

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