

Factors Leading to the Initiation of Christian Men into the Agikuyu Cultural Eldership (*Kiama*)

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Abstract

This study examined factors leading to the current resurgence of the Agikuyu cultural eldership council known as *Kiama*, especially the initiation of the Christian men into this cultural position. The study was informed by the current conflict between the church and the *Kiama* elders, especially in Central Kenya. The researcher applied the social analysis framework (or the Pastoral Circle), which investigates a social phenomenon in four steps: immersion, analysis, reflection, and response. The researcher used a qualitative research design involving face-to-face open-ended interviews with several men in the Agikuyu Council of Elders (*Kiama*), pastors, and elders of selected churches within the Kikuyu constituency in Kiambu County. The study found that the factors leading to the initiation of Christian men into *Kiama* ranged from cultural identity, personal crises, social support, seeking community, reinforcing patriarchy, economic factors, societal status, and religious factors. The Christian men involved in the cultural initiation do so despite their standing in the Christian community.

Keywords: *Kiama*, Agikuyu, *Muthuuri*, Syncretism, Christianity and African Culture

Introduction

In his book, *Christianity and Culture*, John Nganga captures the clash between Christianity and the African Traditional Religion (ATR) among the Agikuyu community of Central Kenya. He notes that since the early 2000s, there has been a “vigorous revival of traditional cultural customs” in Central Kenya, which, left unchallenged, will progressively produce “a form of Christianity...that is not Christianity at all.”¹ In addition, the Moderator of the Twenty-Third

¹ John Ng’ang’a, *Christianity and Culture* (Nairobi: Taruma Consultants, 2022), xviii.



General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), the Rt. Rev. Thegu Mutahi termed the trend of ordaining the church elders as Gikuyu traditional elders as “dangerous.”² While acknowledging that this resurgence could “undermine Christianity,” Omondi posits that the motivation for this trend is to reclaim the cultural practices and “rites of passage” lost during the colonial period and not religious in nature.³

It is noted that the Christian men who join *Kiama* subscribe to the Christian values on the one hand and their traditional religious values on the other, especially during special occasions like initiation, marriage, and the last rites.⁴ Omondi writes that “most *Kiama* adherents are Christians...they attend church service in the morning, partake in the Holy Communion and in the afternoon attend *Kiama* and participate in its rituals and ceremonies.”⁵ Galgalo refers to this mixture of beliefs, values, and practices of Christianity and traditional religion as syncretism. In his article, *Syncretism in African Christianity: A Boon or A Bane?* he uses the analogy of a bottle with a label.⁶ The bottle is labeled Christianity; however, the spirituality within the bottle is that of the African traditional religion. Surprisingly, some of those joining the ranks of the priesthood in the Agikuyu traditional worship are the leaders in the church who hold various positions. Stephen Ndung’u et al. observed that some of those who serve in the Anglican Synod of the Diocese of Mount Kenya South (DMKS) are members of the *Kiama*.⁷ Galgalo warns that when syncretism and secularism are ignored in the church, they carry “the potential to eclipse African Christianity.”⁸

When this trend of Christian men joining *Kiama* is challenged in the church, whether Mainstream or Pentecostal Churches, it attracts a massive backlash from the Agikuyu non-Christian elders who claim that joining *Kiama* is a personal choice and that these men were first

² Kamau Thairu, *The Priest as an Elder: Inculturation of the Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of Agikuyu Eldership* (Downtown Printing Works, 2021), iv.

³ Francis Omondi, “Kiama Kia Athuri: An Evaluation of Its Offence to Christianity,” Figshare. April 14, 2023, 2, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22634737>.

⁴ Joseph Galgalo, “Syncretism in African Christianity: A Boon or A Bane?” in *African Contextual Realities* (Langham Global Library, 2018), 86.

⁵ Stephen Njenga Ndung’u, Rt. Rev. Canon Dr. Emily Onyango, and Rev. Dr. Sammy Githuku, “The Effects of the Missionaries’ Strategies upon the Agikuyu Rituals in the Light of Kiama Kia Athuri and Its Persistence: A Case of Anglican Church of Kenya, Diocese of Mount Kenya South: 1960-2020,” *Strategic Journal of Business & Change Management* 8, no. 4 (November 11, 2021): 644, 655, <https://doi.org/10.61426/sjbcm.v8i4.2131>.

⁶ Galgalo, “Syncretism in African Christianity: A Boon or A Bane?” 87.

⁷ Ndung’u, Onyango, and Githuku, “The Effects of the Missionaries’ Strategies upon the Agikuyu Rituals in the Light of Kiama Kia Athuri and Its Persistence:”

⁸ Joseph Galgalo, “Syncretism in African Christianity: A Boon or A Bane?” 79.



Agikuyu before they became Christians.⁹ They also rebut that Christianity is “a relic of the colonizers” and, therefore, an obstacle to the full enjoyment of freedom.¹⁰ This paper therefore, seeks to establish the factors leading to the initiation of these Christian men into the Agikuyu Council of Elders (*Kiama*).

Definition of Key Terms

Kiama - (singular) Refers to the Agikuyu council of elders grouped into regional cells called *Mwaki* (fire or fireplace). The men initiated into *Kiama* acquire a title, *Muthuri* (an elder), and can participate in various leadership roles and tasks in the Agikuyu society, including civil, political, and religious.¹¹

Agikuyu refers to a Bantu-speaking community that is mainly found in Central Kenya. With the advent of colonialism, many of them feel they were robbed of their rich cultural heritage and forced into a foreign culture through the introduction of Christianity.¹²

Syncretism- This is the fusion of diverse belief systems.¹³ This paper will refer mainly to blending Christian beliefs and practices with those of the Agikuyu Traditional Religion.

Problem Statement

Reverting to traditional beliefs and practices is not a new phenomenon in Christianity. The Jewish Christians were tempted to revert to the Jewish customs and practices, especially when they were faced with persecution (Heb 10:33–39). Some of them felt strongly about perpetuating Jewish traditions and the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, which led to a debate that culminated in the first church council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–29). The Gentiles who were turning to Christ for salvation were coming from pagan contexts and practices which, though permissible in their societies, were incompatible with their newfound faith (1 Cor 6:9–11). The apostles disciplined them and admonished them concerning their new identity in Christ. They also taught them about their privileged position in Christ, their hope of eternal life, and how these privileges informed their new behavior in society, in the family, and at work, including their

⁹ Nicholas Komu, “PCEA Ban on Kikuyu Rite Sparks Big Storm,” Nation, June 28, 2020, <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/pcea-ban-on-kikuyu-rite-sparks-big-storm-46884>.

¹⁰ Thairu, *The Priest as an Elder: Inculturation of the Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of Agikuyu Eldership*, viii.

¹¹ Omondi, “Kiama Kia Athuri,” 4.

¹² Evanson N. Wamagatta, *The Presbyterian Church of East Africa: An Account of Its Gospel Missionary Society Origins, 1895-1946* (Peter Lang, 2009), 56–59.

¹³ Merriam Webster, “Definition of Syncretism,” accessed November 17, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syncretism>.



relations with the government of the day. They warned against pagan practices of communion with the spirits of the dead, echoing Moses' instruction to the Israelites (Lev 19:21; Deut 18:9–12; 1 Cor 10:19–22). This portrays a constant struggle that Christianity faces as it spreads and interacts with diverse cultures. While interacting with the culture, a Christian needs to discern the beliefs and practices resulting from the fallen human nature, such as communion with the spirits of the dead through blood sacrifices, fortune telling, divination, and such practices, and apply “redemptive-centred theology.” On the other hand, for those beliefs and practices that are good in the culture, such as honoring parents, hospitality, and service, the Christian needs to apply “creation-centred theology.”¹⁴ Reverting to Agikuyu Traditional Religion with its beliefs and practices, whether to reinforce one's cultural identity, address personal crises, for economic reasons, or gain a societal status, points to insufficient spiritual formation and poor understanding of the Christian doctrines among the Agikuyu men.

Literature Review

This section explores relevant literature on the subject of Christianity and culture, and specifically initiation into *Kiama*. The researcher will discuss the theoretical framework, the process of initiating men into Kiama, their ranks, and responsibilities.

Christianity and Culture

In his classic book, *Christ and Culture*, Richard Niebuhr categorizes five models through which Christians have sought to remain faithful to Christ as their supreme authority as Christianity spread from one culture to another.¹⁵ The first model he termed as *Christ against culture*, where culture was viewed as irredeemably corrupt. Christians in this model pull away from the culture of their day. However, they cannot fully separate themselves. The second category is *Christ for the Culture*. In this model, Christ is viewed as the one who fulfils the deepest aspirations of society, such as wisdom for life and morals, and is therefore fully aligned with the common beliefs and norms of the day. These eventually replace Christ as the supreme authority, and culture becomes an idol. Third, there is a category that views *Christ above culture*. In this model, there are three

¹⁴ Marc Grenier and Gnomon Center for the Humanities, “Taking God Out of Context: Bevans' Typological Models of Religious Life,” *Philotheos* 23, no. 1 (2023): 13, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philotheos20232313>. Creation centred theology traces its roots to the goodness of all that God created, while redemptive centred theology is premised on the restoration of the creation to the original intention of God.

¹⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 1st edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).



approaches. The *synthetic approach* advocates drawing from both Christ and the culture. They view aspects of culture as gifts of grace from God, and therefore helpful in the Christian mission. The second approach is the *dualist approach*, which continuously sees tension between Christ and culture, and thus, Christians must be wary of what they pick from culture. The third approach is *conversionist*, who see Christ as the one who brings transformation of culture presently. In other words, culture can be transformed and become an agency for the society to experience the Kingdom of God presently. Niebuhr observes that no one model can stand entirely on its own.¹⁶ As the church seeks to disciple the men in central Kenya, it should consider these facets of culture since it is not separate from society.

Initiation into Kiama: Processes, Ranks, and Responsibilities

Traditionally, the Agikuyu Council of Elders (*Kiama*) was the highest decision-making organ in the Agikuyu community.¹⁷ It was responsible for all aspects of the community, including judicial, religious, security, economic, and general welfare.¹⁸ Four levels of growth in the council were determined by age and the number of goats a man had contributed.

The first level was *Kiama kia Kamatimu* (council of the spears).¹⁹ The first goat was usually given by a man for his sons (*aanake*), especially after they were initiated (circumcised), and was termed *Mburi ya hako* (a goat opening the door for the young man to come close to the elders). This level was not counted as full membership; it was only the introductory level. The second level was known as *Kiama kia Ndegwa* (Council of the oxen). This was the entry-level eldership, where full membership could be secured. After marriage and having a child, a man was expected to give a goat and a guard of *Muratina* (the Agikuyu cultural beer) for this level. Such a man could be described as *Muthuuri wa mburi imwe* (the elder of one goat).²⁰ He had to be vetted on matters of discipline, integrity, and truthfulness before being declared a full member.²¹ Admission into the council involved a chant where the other elders responded in the affirmative. Thairu states some of the prayers which would be made on this occasion:

¹⁶ Niebuhr, 236.

¹⁷ Thairu, *The Priest as an Elder: Inculturation of the Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of Agikuyu Eldership*, 156.

¹⁸ Thairu, 155–56.

¹⁹ Ng'ang'a, *Christianity and Culture*, 91.

²⁰ Thairu, *The Priest as an Elder: Inculturation of the Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of Agikuyu Eldership*, 159.

²¹ Mt Kenya Star, "Central Kenya Men Turn to Old Customs," *The Standard*, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/counties/article/2001362578/central-kenya-men-turn-to-old-customs>.



Leader: *Kiama Ugai, Kiama Kiromwenda* (council repeat after me, let the council accept him)

Council responds: *ii kiromwenda* (Yes, let the council accept him)

Leader: *Angigatua ciira, urothira*, (When he decides a case, may it end)

Council: *ii urothira* (Yes, let it end)

Leader: *Angigatuithania mbaara irothira*, (When he pacifies a battle/ conflict, may it end)

Council: *ii irothira* (yes, let it end)²²

Leader: *angikanahorohaniria kundu gutemanitwo, horohio io ironina uuru*, (when he adjudicates between parties where blood has been shed, may the bitterness end,

Council: *Ironina uuru*. (May the bitterness end)

Leader: *angikanaigwithania andu mahitanitie maroiguana*, (when he reconciles people in a conflict, may they be reconciled)

Council: *Maroiguana* (May they be reconciled)²³

Kenyatta observed that these councils of *Kamatimu* and *Ndegwa* were responsible for defending the community. They were warriors and did menial jobs during ceremonies, such as fetching firewood, skinning animals, serving as messengers, and lighting fires.²⁴ *Kamatimu* and *Ndegwa* could not eat certain parts of meat, such as kidneys, spleen, and other softer parts, which were a reserve of the senior elders.

Third, there was *Kiama kia Mataathi* (council of peace).²⁵ The elders carried the leaves of *Mataathi* (*Artemisia afra*) and a black staff (*Muthiigi*), symbols of peace.²⁶ They were meant to be the legislature and the judiciary of the community. One qualified to join this level when their first-born boy or girl was due for circumcision. They gave them another goat, which made them known as *Muthuuri wa mburi igiri* (an elder of two goats).²⁷ This goat was called *horio* (the calming goat) in other literature. Kenyatta lists various activities during this ceremony, where other elders were present. The officiating elder sipped and spat some beer on the shoulders of the incoming elder. Some of this beer was spilled on the three stones at the fireplace, invoking the ancestors' names to come and commune with them on this occasion. The child due for initiation was also prayed for.

²² Thairu, *The Priest as an Elder: Inculturation of the Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of Agikuyu Eldership*, 159–60.

²³ Kevin Muriithi Ndereba, "The Supremacy of Jesus Christ:" *African Theological Journal for Church and Society* 2, no. 2 (October 6, 2021): 49–50.

²⁴ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1978), 200, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/287041.Facing_Mount_Kenya.

²⁵ Ng'ang'a, *Christianity and Culture*, 91.

²⁶ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 202.

²⁷ Thairu, *The Priest as an Elder: Inculturation of the Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of Agikuyu Eldership*, 160–61.



The couple being initiated was counseled on the council etiquette, which was never to be disclosed to anyone except same-level elders. Outside the hut, the elder officiating the initiation would lead in the prayer for prosperity and peace of the land. A male goat would be slaughtered, and a mixture of its blood and *taatha* (stomach and intestines contents) would be poured around the compound to keep the evil spirits away.²⁸ This ceremony also marked the exit from the warrior category.

Fourthly, there was the *Kiama kia Maturanguru* (council of the wise). This was the highest level of eldership. These elders carried the leaves of the *Maturanguru* tree (*Vernonia holstii*) and constituted the *ndundu ya kiama* or the consultative inner circle.²⁹ Due to their vast experience, they were considered wise. They would always retreat to make major decisions, just as present judges or commissioners do when dealing with judicial matters.³⁰ They were responsible for teaching *Kirira kia Ugikuyu* (customs of the Agikuyu community). Both Kenyatta and Ng'ang'a agree that one is qualified for this category after their last child was circumcised and their wives were beyond child-bearing age.³¹ Such a man was also known as *Muthuuri wa mburi ithatu* (an elder of three goats).

One among them would be made the *Muthamaki wa kiama* (the king of the council). This person was viewed as possessing qualities such as *kihoto na ma* (justice and truth).³² Such a leader also demonstrated wisdom, bravery, industriousness, and impartiality.³³ *Athamaki* (plural for *muthamaki*- king) were designated various roles according to their aptitudes and abilities. According to Thairu, some were in charge of war (*athamaki a ita*), religion (*athamaki a kirira*), governance (*athamaki a bururi*), and others in charge of judicial decisions (*athamaki a ciira*).³⁴ Those elders in charge of religion led the sacrificial ceremonies under the *Mugumo* tree.

A special category of elders was known as *Kiama kia guthathaiya* (council of religious worship).³⁵ This was the most revered level of eldership. These were the very elderly, who were considered to have nine legs (*maguru kenda*). The nine legs were cumulative of four legs as a

²⁸ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 202-3.

²⁹ Ng'ang'a, *Christianity and Culture*, 92, 156.

³⁰ Thairu, *The Priest as an Elder: Inculturation of the Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of Agikuyu Eldership*, 156-57.

³¹ Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 203. See also, Ng'ang'a, *Christianity and Culture*, 92.

³² Thairu, *The Priest as an Elder: Inculturation of the Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of Agikuyu Eldership*, 153.

³³ Thairu, 157.

³⁴ Thairu, 162.

³⁵ Omondi, "Kiama Kia Athuri," 7.



child, two legs as an adult, and three “legs” (two legs and a walking stick making three) as an old man. They were also called *mundu mwega* (a good man) *mundu muthingu* (a righteous man), and it was their honor to lead in “sacrificial rituals, preside over communal worship, or host circumcision rites in his homestead.”³⁶ Their age was interpreted as a favor from God, and they were thought to possess spiritual power.

Points of Contention

The values of respect, cohesion, and order in society are central in African cultures, aspects that the present society must find means of propagating. However, there are certain aspects of *Kiama*, that stand opposed to the doctrines of Christianity. For example, the cultural identity of the *Kiama* members, which regulates the relationships between men based on tribe as well as the number of goats a person has contributed, cannot stand the doctrine of our new identity in Christ, which rises above tribe or any other division (Eph 2:11–22). Second, *Kiama* members believe in communion with the *ngomi* (spirits of the departed patriarchs), especially during life transitions such as birth, circumcision, weddings, and funeral rites. These *ngomi* are invoked to bless the families and protect them from misfortunes.³⁷ However, those who trust in Yahweh are not to turn to the dead for guidance or to seek a blessing since it is idolatry (Lev 19:31; Deut 18:10–12). Third, it is impossible to reject the deity of Jesus and remain a Christian (John 1:14, 1 John 2:22). Fourth, Christians know that the sacrifice of Christ has atoned for their sins, and that the blood of goats and bulls cannot take away their sins. These belong to the old order of worship, which has become obsolete (Heb 10:5–14). These and other beliefs and practices within *Kiama* are incompatible with the Christian doctrine.³⁸

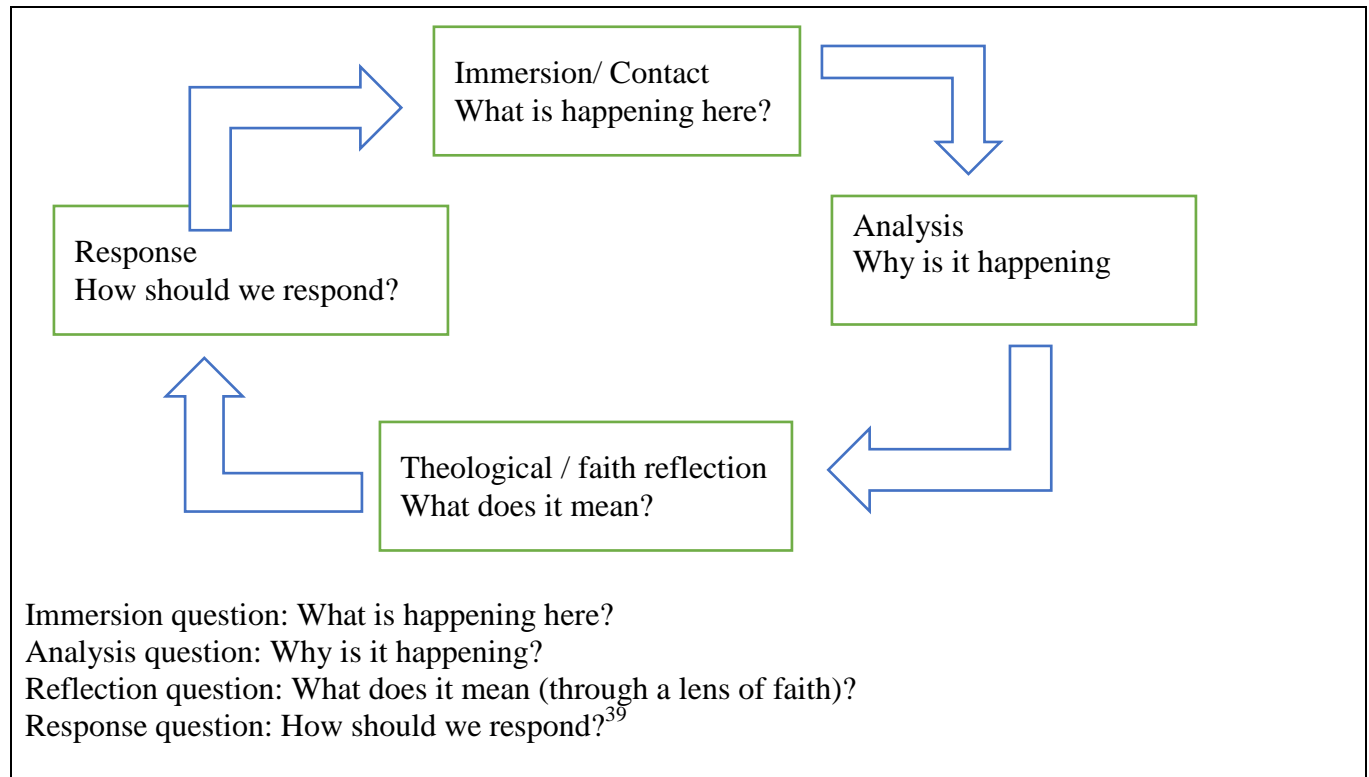
³⁶ Thairu, *The Priest as an Elder: Inculturation of the Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of Agikuyu Eldership*, 164.

³⁷ *Gikuyu Academy- Thiiri Wa Ngomi*, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdoUfuoc8yE>.

³⁸ Ndereba, “The Supremacy of Jesus Christ.”



Theoretical Framework: The Pastoral Circle



Adapted from *The Pastoral Spiral: Social Analysis for the 21st Century*. p. 67

Joe Holland and Peter Henriot first mooted the Pastoral Circle theory in their book *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*.⁴⁰ They investigated the problem of systemic poverty and what it would take to see real transformation among poor communities. Cimperman, building on their theory, proposed four steps into this kind of inquiry: Experience or Immersion – where the researcher asks, “What is happening here?” This is followed by Social Analysis, where the researcher asks, “Why is this happening?” The third step is Faith Reflection – “What does it mean through the faith angle?” and the fourth step is Action, where the question is “How should we respond?”⁴¹ In this step, the researcher targets all the relevant stakeholders and plans interventions to address the matter.⁴² This framework is applicable to this research.

Immersion- What is happening? This study is focused on the growing phenomenon of the initiation of Christian men into *Kiama*, especially those from the Agikuyu community.

³⁹ “Pastoral_circle.Pdf,” accessed September 27, 2023, https://ignatiansolidarity.net/immersion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2012/08/pastoral_circle.pdf.

⁴⁰ Joe Holland and Peter J. Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Orbis Books, 1983).

⁴¹ Maria Cimperman, *Social Analysis for the 21st Century* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 67.

⁴² Cimperman, 66–135.



Analysis- *Why is it happening?* Through existing literature and interviews, the researcher pointed out various factors that led to the initiation of Christian men into *Kiama*. This was achieved through one-on-one interviews with respondents in *Kiama* and clergy from selected churches in the Kikuyu subcounty. The data generated was then coded and collated into themes or factors. The factors ranged from cultural identity to personal crises, cultural patriarchy, economic factors, and religious factors.

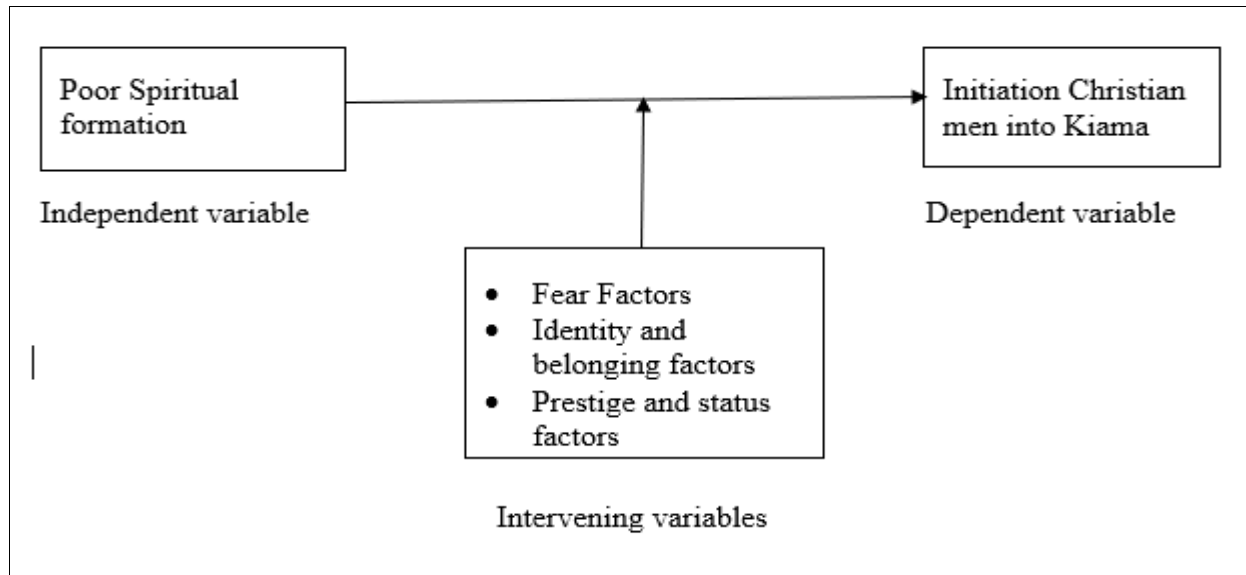
Reflection- *What does it mean theologically?* The researcher reflected theologically on each of the given factors. For example, to what extent should cultural identity dictate the interactions between Christian men in the church or the community? Furthermore, doesn't the Christian identity "in Christ" outweigh any other identity based on the number of goats a man has contributed in *Kiama*? Philomena Mwaura raised a similar question, "Are Christians today aware of their basic identity in Christ? Or have other identities defined by nationality, ethnicity, class, age, gender, or church affiliation overruled this basic identity?"⁴³

Response – *How should we respond?* The researcher recommends that, in addition to issuing Pastoral letters addressing cultural dilemmas, churches should emphasize teaching programs for developing deep Christian convictions and facilitate open discussions around cultural dilemmas faced by the Christian men in the Agikuyu community.

⁴³ Philomena N Mwaura, "Christian Identity and Ethnicity: Reflections on the Gospel of Reconciliation," *Paper Presented at the Second Conference of the Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church Trento, Italy*, July 23, 2010, 130.



Conceptual Framework



Source: Author

Methodology

The researcher chose the qualitative methodology⁴⁴ to listen to the subjective and objective experiences of the participants concerning their initiation into the Agikuyu Council of Elders (*Kiama*) and the factors that led to their initiation into *Kiama*. Qualitative research involves studying a thing or things “in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.”⁴⁵

Research Questions

1. Does the presence of spiritual formation programs in churches deter the initiation of Christian men into the Agikuyu council of elders (*Kiama*)?
2. What are the factors leading to the initiation of Christian men into the *Kiama* (Agikuyu council of elders)

⁴⁴ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th edition (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2018).

⁴⁵ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Fourth edition (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2011), 3.



Research Design

This research adopted the phenomenological approach⁴⁶ to describe what “all the participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon.”⁴⁷ Van Manen defines a phenomenon as an “object of human experience,” for example, grief, poverty, or injustice.⁴⁸ In this case, the phenomenon under inquiry is the initiation of the Christian men into the Agikuyu Council of Elders known as *Kiama*. Interviewing individuals initiated into *Kiama* gave the researcher an understanding of their shared experience and the factors that led to their initiation. Creswell calls this a “philosophical discussion of the subjective experiences and objective experiences shared in a group.”⁴⁹

Sampling and Sample Size

In phenomenological research, a sample is a representative group of “people who have experienced the same phenomenon.”⁵⁰ This study adopted a sample size of 15 (10 *Kiama* members and five clergy). The phenomenological design relies on a small sample to allow in-depth interaction with the participants and to understand their experiences. The researcher is also careful when new contacts generate no new information. This point is known as the saturation point. Dukes proposes 3–10 individuals,⁵¹ and Riemen proposes 10 individuals.⁵² Polkinghorne suggests between 3 and 25, depending on the nature of the study.⁵³ Members of *Kiama* are also cautious about how much information they can divulge to someone who has not been initiated into the *Kiama*.⁵⁴ Also, by the 15th interviewee, it was possible to have reached the saturation point, where no new information is generated. The researcher adopted a snowballing or chain sampling technique where one participant would refer to or introduce the next person to be

⁴⁶ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2013).

⁴⁷ Creswell 2013, 76.

⁴⁸ Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, 2nd edition (Albany, N.Y.: State Univ of New York, 1990), 163.

⁴⁹ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 78.

⁵⁰ Creswell, 155.

⁵¹ Sheree Dukes, “Phenomenological Methodology in the Human Sciences,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 23, no. 3 (1984): 197–203.

⁵² Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 156.

⁵³ Donald E. Polkinghorne, “Phenomenological Research Methods,” in *Existential-Phenomenological Perspectives in Psychology*, ed. Ronald S. Valle and Steen Halling (Boston, MA: Springer US, 1989), 41–60, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-6989-3_3.

⁵⁴ Ndereba, “The Supremacy of Jesus Christ.”



interviewed.⁵⁵ The researcher used criterion sampling for the interviews with the five church leaders involved with men's spiritual formation. This meant that a sizeable proportion of the men in the church needed to be from the Agikuyu community.

Data Collection

In a phenomenological study, the researcher is the “Key instrument.”⁵⁶ The researcher interviewed participants, observed their behavior and settings, and examined documents such as art or songs that would contribute to the necessary data. The researcher used one-on-one interviews with open-ended questions, allowing the participants to express themselves freely while allowing them to control or censor whatever they were uncomfortable sharing. The answers were recorded during the interview by writing short notes on the responses and other observations made.

Data Processing and Data Analysis

The collected data were read through, memos were written, and similar quotes were grouped. A list of these significant statements was developed. Some of these statements pointed towards the contexts or settings that led to their initiation into *Kiama*. Creswell refers to these as “imaginative variations,” which will differ from one person to another.⁵⁷ These statements were grouped into larger “units of meaning” known as codes. The codes were further grouped into themes. Creswell defines themes as “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea.”⁵⁸

Findings and Discussions

Out of the 10 *Kiama* interviewees who participated in the study, the results showed that they all had participated in the church's spiritual formation programs, such as baptism, confirmation, Holy Communion, confessing salvation, church wedding, or being part of the men's fellowship and church leadership. See the table below.

⁵⁵ Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (SAGE Publications, 1994), 28.

⁵⁶ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 45.

⁵⁷ Creswell, 82.

⁵⁸ Creswell, 186.



Church rite or program	Baptism	Confirmation	Partook in the Holy Communion	Confessed Salvation	Church Wedding	Members or leaders of the Men's Fellowship	Member or leader of the Development Committee
Frequency	10	9	7	4	5	4	4

Table 1.1 shows the frequency of *Kiama* men's participation in church rites and programs.

Such programs as baptism, confirmation, and partaking in the holy communion are commonly preceded by several classes meant to help Christians establish their understanding of the Christian faith. Confession of salvation assumes an understanding of human sinfulness, the sufficiency of the death of Jesus on the cross, and faith in him for salvation (Rom 10:9–10). A Christian wedding portrays the relationship between Jesus and the church, which is his bride (Ephesians 5:31–32). Finally, leadership roles in the church presume a level of spiritual maturity, both in discipleship and service (Acts 6:3). However, in spite of their participation in various church programs, these men were initiated into *Kiama*. The reasons for joining *Kiama* ranged from cultural identity to personal crises, social support, community, patriarchy, economic factors, social status, and religious factors.

Factors that Influence the Initiation of Christian Men into *Kiama*

Cultural Identity

A saying among the *Kiama* members states, “*Kiama gitiheagwo kabira*,” (*Kiama* membership is not given to other tribes); therefore, it is an exclusive affair of the Agikuyu people. By joining *Kiama*, people feel they remain true to their Agikuyu identity. Not joining is portrayed as a betrayal of one's culture, mainly where one's father or grandfather had contributed the first goat (*hako*) on their behalf. In *Kiama*, a man is educated on how to introduce themselves, e.g., My name is Weru, son of Maina, of the house of Mugo, of the clan of Ambui, and I belong to the age-set of Mwangi. This is considered a basic introduction to their sittings. In *Kiama*, a man is educated on the rituals and processes surrounding marriage, dowry negotiations, and general life. Additionally, a man is allowed to have his sons attend group circumcision ceremonies performed in various parts of the Agikuyu land. In these settings, they are also given cultural and moral advice (*kirira*) on expectations as “*aanake*” (young men). Without joining *Kiama*, the sons cannot participate in such organized circumcision rites of the Agikuyu.



Suppose a Christian man still believes they can only give helpful advice to a young man if they have contributed a certain number of goats. In that case, it negates their confession of baptism into one body in Christ, which outweighs any tribal or hierarchy identity based on goats contributions (1 Cor 12:12–14).

Personal Crises

Patterns of misfortunes were interpreted through five lenses by the Agikuyu: “*Murimu, Ndwari, Kirumi, Mugiro, and Thahu*.”⁵⁹ *Murimu* refers to normal sickness, which can be treated medically; however, *Ndwari* refers to sickness or ill health caused by failing to submit or give something demanded from you by your in-laws or elders, e.g., a part of the dowry. This sickness could be either cancer, leprosy, or “madness.” *Kirumi* refers to a curse due to transgressing an order, for example, selling land designated as never to be sold. *Mugiro* refers to taboos set by the forefathers to guide the community and were never to be ignored. Finally, *Thaahu*, are actions or behaviors which defile a person, for example, incest. When ignored, all these restrictions and guidelines lead to misfortunes in a person’s life. However, since ordinary men do not know the exact cause of each misfortune, they join the Kiama so that the elders can interpret these baffling realities (*Kwenjera Kirira*).

For a Christian, the understanding of suffering is wider. In addition to “the fall” being the overall source of suffering, it is evident that not all suffering is a punishment for sin (Gen 3; John 9:1–3). And God in his grace does deliver the Christian from suffering through prayer, but can also allow suffering to linger for his higher glory (Psalm 50:12; 2 Cor 12:9–12).

Social Support during Life Transitions

Some respondents joined Kiama to receive social support in life transitions, such as dowry negotiations, wedding ceremonies, and the death and funeral of a loved one. *Kiama* members are financially and physically supported through the spirit of brotherhood and shared responsibility. During dowry negotiations, apart from financial support, the elders of the Kiama (*Mwaki*- a local cell) take it upon themselves to visit the lady’s home and negotiate on behalf of their members. They do it freely unless the concerned party wants to appreciate the chief negotiator with a “*nduhi*” (token of appreciation), which might be a fuel or transport cost refund. During funeral occasions, members serve diligently (*utungata*), and the grieving party feels relieved to focus on

⁵⁹ Gikuyu Academy- Thiiri Wa Ngomi.



their grief and loss. Members are also offered support in conflict resolution, whether the conflict is business or marriage-related. There is a high council called “*ndundu ya maciira*” (equivalent to a court of law) where a member can present complaints against their peers or spouses. Some high council members do their own investigations and present their findings. Guidance and decisions are made, and the parties are bound to abide by them.

Social support for a Christian should go beyond one’s tribe. In fact, Jesus taught that love and practical support should go across tribal barriers, even to one’s enemies (Luke 10:29–37, Matt 5:43–48).

Seeking a Community

As noted earlier, during initiation day into *Kiama*, a call is made by a *Mugongoni* (Moderator of the meeting) to the other elders present on behalf of the initiate, “*nimwamwitikira?*” translated as, “Have you accepted him?” and the elders reply in the affirmative, “*Ii, nitwamwitikira*” “Yes, we have received him.” This admission into *Kiama* is preceded by a week of personal cleansing by avoiding beer and sex, as well as months of counseling from the foster father (*Mutiiri*) on the norms and expectations of a Kikuyu man/elder. Guests or visitors in such meetings are segregated or made to sit near the gate, away from the other elders. This group, who have not contributed the *ngoima ya hako* (the first goat), are treated as *ihii* (a derogatory Kikuyu term for uncircumcised boys) regardless of their age or status in society. They are made to feel inferior and outsiders. While others enjoy tender chunks of roasted meat, the *ihii* are given bones to extract whatever meat might be there. They are not welcome during dowry negotiations, even when the negotiations involve a member of their family. However, after admission, they can participate fully in the Elders’ meetings (*Mwaki*) wherever they meet across the nation. Members are bound by a common code of conduct whose violation attracts prohibitive fines and excommunication from *Kiama* for a period of time.

Having participated in the Holy communion, it is not in order to regard anyone as a *Kihii*, or an outsider. Sharing in the bread and the cup of the communion is a confession of the brotherhood of the believers without any prejudice whatsoever (John 17:20–21).

Reinforce Patriarchy`

Some respondents joined *Kiama* because it empowers them against women, especially their wives. Once a man joins *Kiama*, his wife automatically joins *Kiama*. The younger women with



little children are called *Kang’ei*, while older women are called *Nyakinyua*. There is a code of conduct for them as well. The woman should obey the *watho* or the rule of her husband. One respondent confided that:

My wife is a deacon in the church. She is a follower of Jesus and does not want to follow *Kiama*’s ways. I don’t force her to. I attend church once in a while on special occasions. For instance, she does not like carrying *Kinya kia Njoohi* (a guard of beer) when we go for *Uthoni* (visit the in-laws). In a sense, we allow each other the freedom of worship. However, in proper Kikuyu culture, there is nothing like freedom of worship.

One clergy in a church that ordains women ministers intimated to me that some men refuse to participate in the Holy Communion when a woman is serving it. In a sense, this attitude aligns with the legend about the beginnings of *Kiama* when the Agikuyu men were subservient to women until they conspired to overthrow their dominance while they were all pregnant.⁶⁰ To this date, they don’t believe in women in leadership.

The Christian understanding of the relationships between a husband and his wife is that they were created equal but have different roles.⁶¹ Both are made in the image of God, and have a free will which should not be usurped. God did not usurp the will of Adam and Eve, nor should a husband subjugate his wife’s will (Gen 3:6).

Economic Factors

Some respondents joined *Kiama* because of the validation from the title “*Muthuuri wa Kiama*” (an elder of *Kiama*). This title presumes that one can be trusted to do what they promised. It also means that they will not defraud someone else in business. Since *Kiama* brings together men from diverse business backgrounds, it becomes possible to form business networks. Businesses, such as supplies, legal representation, or land sale, are granted when there is proof that one belongs to *Kiama*. However, a Christian man ought to be faithful, not because they have a badge of *Kiama*, but because they are a new creation and the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of faithfulness in them (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 5:22–23).

Societal Status

Some men joined *Kiama* because of the social status that comes with it among the Agikuyu. For example, the *Kiama* elders are the ones who assist the local chief in resolving community

⁶⁰ Thairu, *The Priest as an Elder: Inculturation of the Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of Agikuyu Eldership*, 154.

⁶¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan Academic, 1994), 397.



conflicts, whether they be about “*mihaka*” (land boundaries) or family feuds. Once in a while, they contribute some amount of money, buy several goats, slaughter them, and then spend a whole day counseling young men in society (giving them counsel “*Kirira*”). *Kiama* members also endorse politicians, which appears to come with financial tokens. They also demand membership before anyone can vie and be endorsed for a political seat among the Agikuyu. There is a saying among some of the *Kiama* members: “*tutingitongorio ni kihii*,” which means, “An uncircumcised boy cannot lead us.” However, Christians who profess to follow Jesus are not to bend to whatever lengths to be accepted and endorsed by the world. Instead, when they face opposition because of their convictions, they are to remember their Savior who was rejected because they are not of the world (John 17:14–16).

Religious Factors

Some who joined *Kiama* pointed out the parallels between the practices and the Bible. For example, offering blood sacrifices by the Jews in Leviticus, meeting between Moses and Yahweh on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:3), Jesus’ transfiguration on the Mountain (Matt 17:1–13), Jesus’ circumcision (Luke 2:21), the presentation of Jesus in the temple with two pigeons and a pair of turtle doves (Luke 2:24). Due to these parallels and others, they presume that Agikuyu people are actually “Jews.” Some pointed at their Bishops as introducing them to join *Kiama*. One respondent claimed their Bishop contributed for him “*Mburi ya hako*” (the introduction goat). Some of those who champion the conversations “*Kirira kia Ugikuyu*” (the counsel of Agikuyu) through the vernacular radio stations are ordained church ministers, serving or retired. Others argued that they found the church to be very restrictive, whereas in *Kiama* they can enjoy beer or have polygamous marriages. They complained that the church seems to have numerous contributions, so the clergy are fleecing the sheep.

Some felt it was not safe to share their challenges in church or with the pastors because all they expected was a prayer of deliverance from demons and not practical help. Others thought of Christianity as a White man’s religion, who came holding the Bible with one hand and a gun with the other. Some blamed the rising cases of divorce and separation among Christian couples on the shallowness of their Christian vows as compared to the solemn vows made during the traditional ceremony of *Kurenga Kiande* (cutting the shoulder of a goat), which signified the permanence of marriage. Such a wife was never to be divorced! One of the respondents had two



wall hangings in his house, showing both the Christian church wedding and the traditional wedding for his wife, with all the trappings of culture.

Christians need to appreciate the doctrine of the New Covenant, which is not based on the ceremonial laws and regulations of the Old Covenant, such as blood sacrifices and temple worship. These pointed to the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ and his ministry, by which those who believe in him are made acceptable to God (Heb 10:14–18). The pastors, bishops, and clergy in general must hold their call to teaching correct doctrine seriously as those who will give an account to the Chief Shepherd at his return (John 21:15–16, 1 Pet 5:4).

Conclusion

The resurgence of Agikuyu cultural eldership (*Kiama*) has gained momentum in central Kenya in the last few years and attracted Christian men. Most of these men who are getting initiated into the *Kiama* have participated in spiritual formation programs in the church, such as baptism, confirmation, some did church weddings, others profess salvation, and others are ordained ministers or serving in various capacities in the church. The reasons for their initiation into *Kiama* ranged from cultural identity, personal crises, seeking a community, gaining a social status of an elder, social support during life transitions, to reinforce cultural patriarchy, economic factors, and for others, it was religious factors.

However, some of the ethos of *Kiama* stands opposed to the doctrines of Christianity, and therefore, it becomes impossible to be an effective witness for Christ while in *Kiama*. For example, the exclusivity in the identity of *Kiama* members is incompatible with the composition of the church, where there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male or female. We are one brotherhood, one body, sharing in one Spirit (Gal 3:28–29; Eph 4:3–6). *Kiama* members believe in communion with the spirits of the dead (*ngomi*), while in Christianity, the dead are never to be consulted since that is tantamount to idolatry (Lev 19:31). Blood sacrifices are a common practice during *Kiama* meetings, prayers are held facing Mount Kenya religiously, a specific priest (*Mugongoni*) offers sacrifices on behalf of the members for the atonement of their sins. These practices and beliefs deny the supremacy and the efficacy of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, making perfect for all time, those who come to him for their salvation (Heb 10:4–14). Finally, no one who rejects that Jesus is God, revealed in human flesh (incarnation), died and rose again, as we profess during the Holy Communion, can be an effective witness for him (Matt



10:32–33). Those who have been given the role of shepherding the flock must do it with diligence, as those who will account for every sheep to the Chief Shepherd (John 17:12, 1 Pet 5:4).

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