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RECLAIMING AND UPHOLDING SACREDNESS OF PLACES, OBJECTS AND PERSONNEL

A Study of the Agikuyu, Nyandarua-Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Context and background

In the last few years, in some African countries such as Burundi, Rwanda, and Kenya the churches were burnt down; refugees in these churches were plainly and maliciously killed. The study on contemporary perception of sacred places, objects, and personnel was stirred and underscored by this action. Generally, anything that took shelter in sacred places would not be harmed. Vandalization of the sacred is a sign of underlying factors related to the current understanding that people hold. In structuring African traditional heritage sacredness is very vital.

Goal and Objectives

This study examines the underlying factors leading to the loss of sacredness with the hope of finding ways to reclaim and uphold the sense of sacredness. Exploring the sacredness of places, objects, and personnel among the *Agikuyu* of Nyandarua, inspires consciousness of sacredness in contemporary culture.

Methodology

This scientific research is basically a qualitative investigation supplemented by components of quantitative data from purposely and randomly sampled participants.

Results:

The research established that the concept of setting apart is required in both traditional religion and Christianity. Sacredness in traditional religion has to do with wholeness and unity while in Christianity the emphasis is placed on holiness. The research concludes that currently, there is a shift and a decline in perception of sacred places, objects, and personnel.

- They are no longer given the reverence they were accorded before.
- Some of that factors bring change include lack of integration of traditional values in modern culture.
- Lack of continuity of the sense of sacredness from one generation to another. Continuous infighting and forms of divisions cropping into the churches.
- Demystifies the meanings and values of what is sacred, diminishes its mysterious identity.

Losing "sacredness" is losing African identity where God is the center of everything. The need to reclaim some of the traditional perception of sacredness was strongly recommended. Sacredness can be reinforced through use of modern media, offering seminars to the community, and with the support of both the government and sacred leaders. The hope of building the Africa we want requires reclaiming and upholding African spirituality based on the sense of sacredness.

Keywords:

Sacredness, Culture, Identity, Reclaiming, Perception

1. INTRODUCTION

Human beings have not lived in a totally profane world. There is a belief in the existence of mysterious powers that control the world and the human life. Communication between these powers and people leads to religion. According to Dawson (1959), these powers are associated with particular people, things, or places through which the human and the divine worlds communicate. Eliade (1987) refers to these media of communication the “*Axis Mundi*” that is, the center of the earth.

Religion is complex for it consists of many features and it means many things to different people, at different times and in different cultures. The relationship between religion and culture is two-sided. The way of life influences the approach to religion and religious attitude influences the way of life. Consequently, cultural change is likely to impose change in religion and vice versa. This paper specifically explores the contemporary perception of sacred places, objects, and personnel (SPOP). Each community identifies its SPOP depending on its lifestyle, experiences, practices, teachings, or beliefs. Once disconnected from the divine and from the community they represent, SPOP cease to communicate the mysterious power they represent.

2.0 PERCEPTION OF SACREDNESS IN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND IN CHRISTIANITY ANONG THE AGÍKÜYÜ

2.1 The religious, geographical, and historical background

The Agíküyü is the largest ethnic group in Kenya and are spread throughout the country, but their population is concentrated in Central Province. The sampled area of study, North Kinangop division, in Nyandarua South district is situated here (Kenya Gazette, April 2009).

The Agíküyü trace their origin mythically from Mt. Kenya. They believe in one God the creator of the universe, who lives in the sky and has an official dwelling place in Kírinyaga (Mount Kenya) with other minor mountains dwelling places. They worship facing mountain but have specific places set apart at home and a sacred grove, (*Múgumo* tree/*Ficus natalensis*) identified and dedicated for offering sacrifices in each territory.

The Agíküyü religious beliefs and practices were closely interwoven with the social organization of the ethnic group and family life (Leakey, 1977). Religion was never an individual matter but rather a family or community involvement. When an individual member rejected religion, the family worship was intermittent, and it was necessary to disown the person for them to be complete and undivided in worship (*ibid*).

The people in Nyandarua migrated from Nyeri, Murang'a, Kiambu and a few from the Rift Valley while others are born there. Some of them had already converted to Christianity since Missionaries entered Agíküyü land by 1902 (Baur, 1990).

During colonization, the traditional religion was disrupted in Nyandarua as the squatters were not allowed to hold any religious meetings. No time or place was set for worship, but they worshiped secretly (Bottignole, 1984). Currently, majority are Christians, a few traditionalists, and Muslims, while others belong to some indigenous denominations with their various sects. The main Christian denominations are Catholics, Protestants and Evangelicals.

2.1.1 Collection of data

The data was collected from three types of samples namely: 30 Agikuyu traditional informants, 30 Christian informants, and 270 respondents. The Agikuyu traditional informants, purposively sampled ranged between 61–120 years old. The majority were between 70- 90 years old with 16 females and 14 males of whom ¾ had not gone to school. Their place of origin was considered.

The Agikuyu Christian informants ranged between 55-96 years old, and the majorities were between 60-80 years old, with 53.3% females and 46.7% males. Of which 36.7% had no academic education. Their places of origin were represented. Among them 43.3 % were Catholics, 36.7% Protestants and 20% Evangelicals. Church leaders were 20% and 80% were ordinary active Christians. Only two elderly people were unable to go to church.

The 270 respondents randomly sampled, constituted of active church attendees, of whom 24.5% were 15 - 35 years, 47.8% were 36 -55 years, and 27.8% were 56 years and above. Women were 56.3% and the men 43.7%. The majority (64.5%) were born in Nyandarua, and only 6.9% of the respondents had gone to school. Catholics were the majority while Protestants and Evangelicals had equal number. Out of 270 questions distributed, 245 were returned complete: 50.6% by Catholics, 26.5% by Protestants and 22.9% by Evangelicals. Church leaders completed 13.9% and 86.1% were from church members.

Two interview guides were administered to both the traditional and Christian informants to find the meaning of sacredness in both Agikuyu traditional religion and Christianity. Data collected from the Christian respondents by questionnaires supplemented the findings from the interview guides.

The data, gathered with the help of field assistants, was organized, categorized, coded, and summarized based on the following chosen themes:

- The perception of sacredness and SPOP in both Traditional and Christian religions
- Similarities and differences between them
- Change in perception of sacredness and SPOP in both religions
- The factors causing change
- The need to reclaim traditional perception of sacredness and SPOP,
- The way forward

2.2 Perception of sacredness and SPOP in traditional religion

The term “sacredness” was translated in Kikuyu, by the word “*kwamūrwo*”, meaning to set apart from the ordinary and for God. Most informants immediately alluded to this meaning but explained it differently. Being clean and pure are essential elements in sacredness. There was a lot of scrutinizing of what was used, done, or set apart in order to ensure there were no defects in representing the community.

The community activities such as acquiring and tilling of land, planting, and harvesting, were well stipulated and done sacredly. This included sharing the first fruits of the harvest normally placed in a common barn, built by the roadside, for the travelers and the needy. The political lifestyle,

according to an elderly informant, was handled over ceremoniously from one age group to another. Their explanation affirms Mbiti's what said, that in African communities, religion permeates every aspect of life (1968, p.2).

Rituals of consecration involved the community. They included many aspects such as prayer and celebrations with various specific meals from chosen sources, prepared to represent the entire community.

The *Mūgumo* tree, specifically chosen for its features, composition, and nature was the Agīkūyū's shrine. It was the symbol of the wholeness of the community for it represented the whole life of the community. After consecrating the tree ritually, sacrifices and community rituals were carried out here. During calamities, the community gathered to offer sacrifices on the mountain. The leaders, who offered sacrifices were set apart by a ritual. Objects used in such rituals were scrutinized and once used they were considered sacred.

The history, and election, and consecration of SPOP explained their significance and prompted the community to value them. Therefore, choice and attitude of the community towards its SPOP reflected the cultural, social, spiritual, political, economic, mythical, and the communal ethical life. As Ekwunize (1997' p. 7) says, sacredness in African culture is wholeness in unity.

Currently those places are rare and hardly used because the leaders are no more. Christianity has replaced these places with churches. The Agīkūyū who embraced Christianity had to abandon the traditional concepts, but do they find fulfillment in the Christian SPOP?

2.3. Perception of sacredness and SPOP in Christianity

Sacredness in Christianity was described by informants in terms of setting apart for God. What is sacred is empowered with authority to be and to do. It is considered holy. According to the Christian informants and respondents, SPOP purposely set apart by rituals, were sacred. In some churches, rituals of consecration have a big impact and participants observe symbols, actions, blessings, and celebrations that speak deeply to them. Their meaning communicates the act of consecration and their new status, imparting a sense of sacredness to the community.

Some Christian denominations do not emphasize rituals of consecration of SPOP. Consequently, some informants did not know or understand such rituals and their impact. This is quite different from the traditional perception of SPOP, and the approach does not relate to the traditional familiar ways.

2.4 Similarities and differences in perception of sacredness

Most informants and respondents found it difficult to tell the similarities and differences of sacredness in Christianity and traditional religion due to lack of proper knowledge of both religions, but more so, of the traditional religion. Instead, others especially Catholics, compared their pre-Vatican II Council ideas with contemporary experiences. The description from some participants include:

- Sacredness entails setting a part of unblemished object in both religions. However, in traditional religion it was preserved by taboos and rules. Christians were not able to connect the sacrificial aspect in traditional religion with the sacrifice of Christ.

- An elderly man (101 years old) described sacred places in Christianity as a moral teaching ground while the traditional places are for worship. This implies that traditional believers hold that Christianity cannot replace traditional religion, it is just an additional aspect emphasizing society's morals. Would this be one of the reasons why some African Christians practice both religions? They attend church and when in great need they go back to traditional practices.
- Traditional initiation rites prepared people to embrace sacredness, religion, and leadership but they are not replaced by sacramental preparations.
- Unity in worship with some unfaithful church members was a concern. How can the sacrament of penance and the confession of sin from a Christian perspective be explained in this context?
- Negative attitude towards other believers' practices even in the same family was expressed. This did not exist in traditional religion.
- Sacredness is related to holiness and setting apart for God in both religions. Boundaries of sacred places are common in both religions, but they are slowly vanishing.
- The concept of setting apart by ritual involved the entire life of the community in traditional religion unlike in Christianity.
- Some Christian denominations have rituals to mark consecration of SPOP and define them but not others.

These comments have strong implications on the contemporary perception of SPOP. Lack of knowledge of the surrounding creates questions and suspicions instead of reverence. This may lead to what is presented in the problem addressed here i.e., in time of war, SPOP are vandalized. Thus, the concept of sacredness in traditional religions emphasizes the wholeness and reverence which denotes relationship (unity) and reverence. Perception of SPOP varies in Christianity depending on each denomination.

2.4. Change in perception of SPOP

Religious values are interactive since they are embodied in a people who are influenced and shaped by material and social conditions (Livingston, 1998). Thus, a change in lifestyle leads to change in religious approaches. This can be a reinforcement and affirmation of the existing values or a decline of the same.

Informants believed many traditional sacred objects were discarded because they could not be used elsewhere, even in Christianity.

One sacred *Mugumo* tree in the Aberdare Ranges, is still standing. People visit there and although no sacrifices are offered, it is still respected, but for how long will this go on without communal support.

A good number of informants noticed change in perception of contemporary SPOP even in Christianity. They no longer arouse the sense of awe like in the past. The sense of awe, that first excitement and enthusiasm people had when they embraced Christianity, is no longer experienced.

The church buildings are now sometimes used as public sectors where non-religious issues are addressed as confirmed by 91.4% of the Christian respondents. Sometimes back, sacred objects were entrusted to chosen people but nowadays, more and more people are handling them with no reverence. An informant expressed this with sadness and wondered what the future of the church would be like.

Three informants said the sacred personnel are no longer enthusiastic about God's work and their behaviors have changed. They are not respected and when they make mistakes they are criticized in public. Some of them are drawn to secular life portrayed by their behaviors and so lose their credentials. Some few informants still see sacred personnel carrying out their role faithfully. Remarkably, the respondents' study was very different as 95.5% are satisfied with the performance of sacred personnel.

Change in perception of SPOP was not felt by 52.2% of the young respondents and 43.0% of the young adults. Only 4.8% of the elder respondents saw no change. Therefore, age-gap can explain the perception of SPOP. The more one advances in age, the more one gains experience, and can identify differences. The young people do not have the necessary experience to understand the differences.

Change is a gradual process that is not easily noticed. It is inevitable and can be a decline or a growth. Thus, that there is a possibility that some Christians are not actively involved in the church, or they are new members and therefore do not know the difference.

Hence, the difference indicated by age gap and knowledge of sacredness can be interpreted as an indication and confirmation of loss in perception of sacredness. This is a sign that this concept of sacredness may be gradually wiped out. The more people draw closer to SPOP, and the more SPOP are simplified, the more they lose their real identity of the "mysterious otherness" they communicate.

As Livingston (1993) states, "the unique characteristic of sacred power is the fact that it evokes an ambivalent response...simultaneously as awe and aversion and purity and danger." The community lifestyle, the handling of the common good such as lands, environment and human life depicts the spiritual connection with God (sense of sacredness). SPOP are still needed to draw and lead people to sacredness.

2.5 The factors bringing change in perception of SPOP

According to respondents, changes are initiated by modernity, ungrounded faith, loss of cultural values, and demystification of SPOP. Some traditional informants included lack of proper teaching of cultural values. Most Christian informants said the elders' wisdom and knowledge of SPOP is no longer instilled in the younger generation. Most of the young people spend their time on academic studies and little or no time to learn religious values.

It was commented that children are exposed to mass media where sacredness is ridiculed, SPOP are portrayed negatively, and are based on the European culture. This is an extension of lack of inculcation of positive African values in Christianity which were ignored and replaced by European culture that wrapped the gospel values. Finally, the Africans end up throwing out the baby with the bathwater. SPOP are demystified by stripping them of the taboos and the stipulated rules that endorsed them.

2.6 Reclaiming and upholding a sense of sacredness and SPOP

Reclaiming and upholding of sacredness does not mean going back to traditional lifestyle. It calls for identifying and upholding the values that give people their identity and the notion of sacredness that shaped and will continue to give them their identity. Dawson (1959) clearly stated that any society without a culture is formless. The Church in Africa has been advocating for inculturation of positive cultural values which are providential preparation for the gospel (Pope John Paul II, 1995). Integrating the positive values would give the Church in Africa its identity.

Based on this study, the people in Nyandarua recognize that traditional notion of sacredness and respective approaches SPOP shaped the community. The need to recapture a sense of sacredness, was supported by 88.2% of the respondents and 94.7% of them indicated that there is a great need to respect SPOP. This is a sign that the people are open to learn and would like to reclaim and maintain sacredness.

Therefore Christians, value and want to maintain respect for SPOP. Reclaiming and maintaining traditional positives perception of SPOP would strength them. This is a long process, and it is most likely going to encounter many obstacles and difficulties. However, life is always changing and adapting to what seem to attract in the world. Consequently, sacredness has to be advocated for as a rewarding value that will attract the people in many ways. Use of mass media, such as creating movies that reward sacredness might gradually impact some people. More research can be done on this area.

Other ways of reclaiming a sense of sacredness included teaching of the sound traditions surrounding sacredness and SPOP to the young people. This can be included in catechetical sessions according to 31.4% or organized seminars an indicated by 34.3% of respondents. Some informants recalled having attended such teachings by an elderly priest (Fr. George Wambugu of Nyeri diocese) and they still remember what they learned about the relationship between Christianity and Agīkūyū traditional religion. In the beginning traditional religion was presented in a negative way and with no link between the two.

Currently some young people seek knowledge from the elders regarding the community's traditions that were taught during the initiation rites. This had been abandoned for over 30 years. Moreover, group initiation rites of young men have revived, and this is an opportunity to teach positive values.

The quest for traditional practices and teachings might have developed from political need. During the land clashes many people were displaced from their lands, and they have come to see the need of finding and deepening their cultural values and identity. Lack of sacredness manifested by these experiences created the nostalgia for sacredness, their relationship with the God, that gives meaning to their homeland. It is crucial to give the Christians guidance on how to integrate the positive values to avoid syncretism.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The Agīkūyū traditional SPOP were legitimate constitutional properties of the community and the manner of their election and consecration pointed to their significance. The root of the Agīkūyū spiritual life is well elaborated in the symbol and meaning found in the *Mūgumo*. The rituals that surround it unite the community. The people identified themselves with the *Mūgumo* tree in its size,

greatness, and importance in healing of animals and humans and in matters of power of leading the community (Karanja, 2008). The ruling body reclaimed the *Mūgumo* tree by the ritual of dedication. They influenced the community and with their guidance life in the society flowed and was knitted together. In this context, sacredness permeated every aspect of life.

Today, this role is in the hand of the government leaders. The people and their needs depend highly on them. They have an influence on the concept of sacredness in community too. Many issues including land, political clashes, acquiring of places to build churches depend on them. Their attitudes towards community lands, for example the Aberdare forests in Nyandarua that is continually deforested, is at their mercy and so is the handling of vandalism of SPOP. This concept is often neglected in electing them and making of polices that guide the community.

The *Mūgumo* tree, on the Aberdare Ranges, that meant so much for the community if protected would remain a teaching tool for generations if there are policies of identifying such a treasure and cherishing them. A concept of sacredness in the role of leadership can renew unity and eliminate divisions. Hence, the church and the government leaders are recommended to work hand in hand to reclaim and uphold sacredness in the society.

Sacredness in traditional religion as wholeness and unity made an impact in African communities. Change in contemporary perception of sacredness, seen in decline of community's lifestyle, reflects a decline of sacredness. Certainly, losing a sense of "sacredness" is losing African identity where God is at the center of everything. The hope of building the Africa we want requires reclaiming and upholding the African spirituality based on sense of sacredness the importance of SPOP which are the *Axis Mundi*.

4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to my supervisors, Dr. Peter K. Njoroge and especially to Prof. Mary N. Getui who read the research work critically during my studies and for introducing me to African Journal on Land Polices. I am indebted to the field assistants, Bismac M. (RIP), Joachim K. (RIP), Paul M., and Paul W. Thanks to Adriana F., Susan M., and Liz M. for reading this paper. I am thankful for moral and financial support of my religious family. May God bless you all.

5. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The author researched, interpreted the data and wrote the work.

6. FUNDINGS:

Funded by The Missionary Congregation of the Evangelizing Sisters of Mary

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9. KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Culture: A community's lifestyle distinguished by its ecological conditions like, geographical boundaries, economy, political organization, and religious beliefs.

Perception: knowledge of the nature of a subject in each context, acquired through seeing, learning, and relating with the object of concern.

Religion: adherents' view of the supernatural being conveyed in beliefs and practices.

Sacred: what pertains to God and is distinguished from the ordinary. It evokes a sense of awe.