

Culture and Religion in Conflict Management

By Macharia Munene

Abstract

In this article, Macharia Munene discusses the roles of religion and culture in conflict creation and resolution in both pre and post - colonial Kenya. Noting the cultural heterogeneity of Kenya and the often not-so-holy intentions of the church, he highlights the major events in Kenyan History in which the church and Kenyan cultural institutions and practices, especially oathing, have played major roles in conflict enhancement and reduction. The article focuses on three major periods of Kenyan History: The colonial era, the Kenyatta era, and the Moi era. In each era, he captures and comments on the key events involving conflict and the interventions made by religious authorities as well as persons abusing cultural practices in trying to achieve their selfish motives.

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Culture et Religion Leur Rôle dans la Résolution des Conflits

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Résumé:

La communication de Munene discute le rôle de la religion et la culture vis-à-vis de la création et la résolution des conflits au Kenya pré- et poste-colonial. Pour commencer, l'auteur expose l'hétérogénéité culturelle de ce pays. Ensuite, il fait une analyse critique d'événements historiques importantes, en ce qui concerne l'église, les institutions et les pratiques culturelles (notamment la prestation de serments). Cette communication se consacre à l'analyse de trois périodes importantes de l'histoire du Kenya: l'Ere Coloniale, l'Ere de Kenyatta et l'Ere de Moi. Dans chaque cas, Munene cerne et expose les aspects saillants des conflits, ainsi que les moyens adoptés par les autorités religieuses, dans le but de résoudre ces conflits. On n'oublie pas, non plus, de remarquer l'abus des pratiques culturelles, par certains individus, dans le but de satisfaire des fins tout à fait personnelles.

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Culture and Religion in Conflict Management

Culture and religion are closely related in the sense that both are about the way a particular people or different peoples live, bring up their young, what they believe in, and how they relate to their neighbours. While culture is steeped into the traditions and history of the people and often can be explained with specific episodes, religion is more a matter of faith rather than empirical evidence. The accepted faith becomes part of the culture of the people concerned.

Both are important in conflict management, which relates to the ability of a people to avoid conflicts and when they occur to reduce their intensity and ultimately eliminate them. When a people share the same culture and religion, it is possible to appeal to their mutual cultural values or to draw their attention to the accepted norms of resolving disputes. This, unfortunately is not the case in Kenya today since there is no such a thing as a Kenyan culture or religion. There are, instead, multi-faceted collections and groupings of cultures, some of which are co-operative or akin to each other and others which are antagonistic.

It is this collection of diverse cultures, forced together by colonialism, which sometimes is portrayed as African culture. And this African culture has grossly been affected by the colonial experience which was itself antagonistic to and not necessarily for the interest of the Africans. Daniel T. arap Moi, the president of Kenya, in his Kenya African Nationalism Nyayo Philosophy and Principles has aptly said: "A colonial history leaves many scars on the culture, philosophy and psychology of the colonised. Kenyans are no exception to this lamentable observation. It may take generations for Kenyans to re-establish and evolve a new Kenyan cultural identity."¹

While Moi is wrong to assume that there was a pre-colonial Kenyan culture to be re-established, his observation of the

devastating effects of colonialism and the non-existence of Kenyan culture is apt. Part of that colonial legacy was the creation of tribal enmity as the British prepared to vacate the Kenyan soil as rulers². The devastation was inflicted with the assistance of the religions of the colonisers As John Baur, a Catholic priest, has explained in his 2000 Years of Christianity in Africa, "The colonial occupation being accepted as inevitable and beneficial to Africa, some missionaries also co-operated with their colonial compatriots in order to secure 'their' territory by their mother country."³ The end result was a mixture of Western Christian religions as modified by the interests of particular communities in Kenya.

A discussion of the cultural-religious role in conflict management therefore, must take account of Kenya's cultural and religious experience that starts with the onset of colonialism. Baur notes that, "in the eyes of colonizing Europe, the Africans were 'savages' to be civilized, 'cursed sons of Ham' to be cultured, only tribal customs, no religion, only foolish superstitions and devilish cults."⁴ There developed a belief, early in colonial Kenya, that missionaries were there to tame the 'savages' so that they would become efficient labourers for the colonial state.⁵ In the process of taming the foolish superstitions and devilish cults of the 'natives' by imposing their version of religion, missionaries not only quarrelled with each other but also trampled on the cultural sensibilities of the supposed 'savages'.

People in Kiambu, according to the Kikuyu District Commissioner, resented missionary land encroachment and interference in tribal matters. The Kikuyu, wrote the DC in his District Annual Report for 1911-1912, regarded the missionaries as 'just the Europeans who should have been excluded from the Reserves and the natives must regard their being there as 'ruthless disregard of their feelings.' When World War I broke out, the District Commissioner noted that the Kikuyu did not 'love us (the English) and would prefer our absence. In Murang'a they thought that European power was waning and therefore decided

to defy the government and the chiefs on the assumption that whites would leave the country due to the war.⁸

Following World War I, conflict between the colonial state and the missionaries on one side and the colonised Africans had different manifestations. Following the Thuku riots in 1922 and the concerns raised in London, it was the missionaries who found a way of cooling down the temperatures in the conflict between the Asiatic and European claimants to African bounty. The missionaries suggested, and it was accepted, that the British government emphasise the interests of the natives as being paramount whenever there was a conflict with the interests of the immigrant races.⁹ But the conflict between the missionaries and the Kikuyu advocates could not be that easily resolved because it was essentially a cultural dispute, which ended up dividing the missionaries and the colonial state. The governor consequently dismissed John Arthur from the Legislative Council representing native interests because he appeared set on confrontation with Africans at a time when the colonial state wanted to avoid conflict. By working out some degree of cultural understanding amongst some missionaries, the colonial state, and the Africans, the whole issue was made to fizzle out. In this conflict, religious dogmatism on the part of some missionaries had been the obstacle to the management of that particular conflict.¹⁰

The most serious conflict that arose in the colonial times was the Mau Mau War which was managed through the use of force, and cultural and religious propaganda. It was during the Mau Mau War that the colonial state implanted suspicions among the Africans as a fighting strategy. "The Mau Mau war in Kenya," Baur has written "taught Great Britain that another colonial war would be too costly and Prime Minister MacMillan"¹¹ decided to get out of the colonial business. To Michael Blundell, the leading settler spokesman, MacMillan's decision "was a great act of irresponsibility...[since] Kenya was singularly unfitted for independent African rule."¹² The colonial machinery which included

the churches started a process of accommodating not only selected Africans to take up responsibilities which they had been denied before, but also worked hard to keep the Africans divided.

Among those colonial officials who worked hard to instil fear and suspicion amongst various African communities were Michael Blundell and Wilfred Havelock. Having transformed the white settlers into a small tribe, these settler leaders went around 'convincing' other 'small tribes' to gang up against the 'big tribes' of the Kikuyu and the Luo. Havelock explained in 1994. "We realised that whites would be a very small minority. We also realised that other peoples would be in the same situation, and with them we advocated a regional system to protect smaller tribes from domination and exploitation by larger, more powerful groups."¹³ Paradoxically, the large Luhya community was suddenly transformed into a 'small tribe.'

As Africans prepared for independence, therefore, the seeds of continuous split and mutual animosity were planted. In addition, there was a strong drive for power by a number of politicians. Onesmus K Mutungi, now Chairman of the Kenya Human Rights Commission, studied witchcraft in Kenya and noted that it had acquired political importance in independent Kenya and that some politicians were prepared to use it. "In some parts of Kenya," he wrote in Legal Aspects of Witchcraft in East Africa, "witchcraft" seems to have acquired the status of a 'religion'.... Independence brought with it not only political awareness amongst the indigenous peoples of the former colonies, but also a taste of power"¹⁴.

In the post colonial period, there have been two periods of conflict with lasting effects. First were the 1969 oathings which took place mainly in the Central province and the role of the Church in diffusing the situation. Second, are the continuous episodes of political repression and, later on, political thuggery that has been labelled *ethnic conflict*. In the process, there has been use and abuse of various religious institutions as well as

assorted aspects of Kenyan cultural diversity of people to dream of power and for those in power to dream of keeping it perpetually. The taste of power meant that some people would go to any length to acquire or retain it. "In Kenya," Mutungi" observed in 1977, "witchcraft in the form of traditional oaths has been invoked in an attempt to whip potential voters to cast their votes in favour of one against the other candidates thereby giving the phenomenon a new and lucrative market in Kenya's political arena."¹⁵ Such people were also prone to violence to acquire or retain power.

In essence, those resorting to oaths misused various cultural beliefs to influence followers in a particular ill advised direction. This was the situation in 1969, when a number of Kikuyu elite surrounding Jomo Kenyatta hatched up the oath that was variously referred to as 'chai,' 'buying land in Gatundu' for a mere ten shillings. As numerous matatus, buses and lorries were seen ferrying people to unknown destinations, a cloud of anxiety descended on the country. The purported purpose of the oath was to keep the flag in the House of Mumbi. It was not long before the perpetrators of this oath started to differ as some were reportedly of the opinion that the flag, or the 'Piki Piki', should never cross River Chania.

What dampened this oathing movement, however, was not the disputes within the oathing community, although it played a part. A number of factors were responsible for the ending of the oathing. First, there was a lot of resistance in the GEMA community, which was unhappy with the whole idea. A number of people who had taken the Mau Mau oath and seemingly had not benefited from the Kenyatta-Koinange assumption of power considered the whole process a new way of duping people and they were not willing to be duped again. Second, and most important, there was intense resistance by various religious bodies to the oathing. Foremost in this resistance was the Presbyterian Church of East Africa which produced a well publicised martyr in the person of Pastor Gathinji. The resis-

tance and publicity given to it made the Kenyatta regime look ridiculous and subsequently the whole exercise was quietly terminated.

The resistance mounted by the religious bodies showed that the Churches had come of age in independent Kenya. With the coming of independence there had been a lot of Africanisation in various religious bodies whether they were of the Christian or Islamic variety. They initially had very cozy relations with Kenyatta, who made a point of not discriminating against any religion or keeping his faith to himself. In fact many of them indirectly owed their positions to Kenyatta's political activities. Once in positions of religious authority, just as Kenyatta was doing in the secular sector, they had been doing their best to Africanize and to minimise European influence. The only problem was that there were not enough qualified Africans and so, as Catholic Bishop John Njenga of Eldoret reportedly stated. "For some time the missionaries are still a necessary evil."¹⁶ The white missionaries, however, were not the determining factor in Kenya anymore with regard to religious decisions. The decision to resist the oathings showed these bodies to be independent and to be determined to help remove potential sources of conflict in Kenya. By their resistance, the churches helped to diffuse a potential political conflict in Kenya.

With Kenyatta's death and the ascension of Daniel arap Moi to the presidency, there was a general air of optimism. The churches appeared to be flattered by the fact that Moi regularly attended church publicly, unlike Kenyatta who used to attend church only when it was a matter of national importance like the funeral of a cabinet officer. "As a Christian," Moi wrote, 'I have had to live a life of love. Our saving Lord Jesus Christ said, 'Peace I leave with you...' thereby commanding His followers to propagate and live in peace.... as a Christian I would be wrong if I did not practise peace, love and unity.' He went on to claim that Nyayoism was akin to Christianity or "fired by the eternal concepts of a living Christian faith."¹⁷ This air of optimism,

however, dissipated quickly and the Church became split between those who questioned unacceptable activities by the government or its top officials and those who were die-hard supporters of Moi irrespective of what the situation was. Despite the split, churches have acted as agents of diffusing volatile situations.

Moi, in his 1986 Kenya African Nationalism, claimed that his administration instituted a 'revolution' that changed Kenya in contrast to Kenyatta's evolutionary trend. "*Nyayoism*," he wrote, "has superimposed revolutions upon ongoing process of evolution."¹⁸ In the process of superimposing the revolution, his regime became repressive as it adopted an *ideology of the fimbo* in which all Kenyans were expected to sing to his tune.¹⁹ A particular target in the implementation of the *ideology of the fimbo* were intellectuals who, Moi claimed, had forced professors "not to speak on national issues where courage, mature intellectualism and committed nationalism are called for, even when intellectual terrorism has invaded a university and other sacrosanct national institutions." His solution was to create "intellectual *homeguards*," whose main job would be to counter "intellectual terrorism, political agitation in the universities . I see no alternative to the intellectual re-education of staff for the purpose of reforming the learning atmosphere."²⁰ In the process of re-education, many were tortured and Moi explained to people in London: "Of course we torture people. But we don't torture everybody. We torture the ringleaders of Mwakenya, otherwise how can we find out information about them? They are bent on destroying our society."²¹ Since Kenya was a sovereign state, he argued, he should not be questioned when he locked up dissidents.

The consolidation of repressive means in Moi's hands put the government at loggerheads with the citizens. The Weekly Review, commented on 1988 as the year "of further consolidation of the power and prestige of the presidency in Kenya"²² But as other institutions in the country were silenced through 're-education', the public found a voice in the Churches since they were the only

institutions that had not been fully subjected to the *ideology of the fimbo*. Beginning in 1986, the Church as a whole became a vocal critic of Moi's policies. Starting with the decision to impose the hated queue voting system, their concern was that forcing people to line behind a candidate would create animosities among Kenyans, jeopardize the freedom of conscience assured by secret balloting, and take away the clerics' ability to serve all members of their congregation. The National Christian Council of Kenya (NCCCK) started publishing a magazine, **Beyond**, which sharply pointed out the anomalies existing in various government bodies. Most important, it gave details of the Mlolongo riggings in 1988 which led to its being banned.

Though the magazine, **Beyond**, was banned, the clergy became increasingly vocal in their observation of the Kenyan scene. Anglican Bishop Alexander Muge attracted wrath by reportedly comparing oppression in Kenya to that of Apartheid South Africa and advising Moi not to surround himself with sycophants. He was threatened by a number of politicians and he died in a road accident in 1990 after defying a cabinet minister's warning not to visit Busia²³. His Presbyterian counterpart, Timothy Njoya, had earlier in the year, in his New Year Sermon at St. Andrews, angered the Kenyan power brokers by suggesting an end to Kenya's single-party system which he insisted had been imported to Africa by Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere from Communist states which were at that time collapsing.²⁴ To a large extent, the religious bodies were in the forefront of the struggle for political pluralism in Kenya.

In reaction to calls for multi-partyism, Mutungi's observation that some people could do anything to maintain political power began to be actualised as cabinet ministers and supposed KANU supporters advocated violence. William Ole Ntimama, Minister for Local Government advised his followers to take up rungu's and clobber advocates of multi-partyism 'because our power of the pen is limited,' he reportedly said, 'we will use rungu's to keep the multi-party advocates away.'²⁵ In September 1991, promi-

nent KANU politicians, including cabinet officers met at Kapsabet and Narok and issued war-like declarations against other Kenyans. Minister Nicholas Biwott warned multi-party advocates not to step into the Rift Valley and said that KANU youth wingers were 'ready to fight to the last person to protect' Moi's government. Minister John Cheruiyot wanted 'everyone to guard President Moi's Government and crush its critics. Minister Timothy Mibei advised people in the Rift Valley to "crush any government critic and later make reports to the government that they had finished them." Assistant Minister Paul Chepkok advised people to 'destroy' members of FORD on sight.²⁶ Soon after those declarations, the *ideology of the fimbo* was used and killings started in parts of Western and Rift Valley provinces in effort to frighten those seemingly critical of the government.²⁷ By unleashing violence, the perpetrators claimed they were protecting their interests, cultural and political.

The killings showed that there was very little love and Christianity left in those who were involved and the Church led the way in condemning the new politically sponsored atrocities. The Catholic Bishops in Kenya raised their voice and condemned the advocates of violence and denial of freedom of political association. They lamented:

*... the multi-party speakers were silenced and condemned, some of them imprisoned and others detained for being subversive whereas the proponents of 'majimbo' were given a public forum as political leaders were just invited to stop the debate. It would be disastrous if freedom of expression were not the same for all.*²⁸

Nakuru Catholic Bishop Ndingi Mwana a'Nzeki became vocal in making public the details of the atrocities and called on President Moi to act and end the killings. Catholic Bishop Korrir of Eldoret challenged the provincial administration to come clean on the killings, CPK Bishop Stephen Kewasis noted that the police were doing little to arrest arsonists, and PCEA Moderator

Bernard Muindi accused politicians of inciting violence.²⁹ These concerns did not necessarily end the killings but they helped to reduce the tension.

Conclusion

Kenya is a recent colonial creation which is hardly 100 years old but in those 100 years events have drastically transformed the people who live here. Colonialism was the agent that brought disparate peoples with different cultural backgrounds under one roof for easy administration. It imposed its own dictates which came to be accepted as part of Kenya's normal operations. A cultural-religious marriage began to take place between the ways of the whites and the amalgamation of various African norms and values.

Christianity was grudgingly accepted as a new religion of the Africans although it created problems of identity which were compounded by divisions within the denominations. There were different types of conflict with the Church, which were sorted out either by secession or by reaching cultural compromises in the colonial days. The compromises were not only necessary for the Church, they were also necessary for the Africans and the colonial administration. There thus remained a little bit of the old to permeate Kenya constantly.

At the time of independence, as Mutungi aptly noted, access to political power became possible to many more people than had been the case in colonial times and this brought in unexpected problems. Unhappy with their imminent departure, settler and colonial officials worked hard to sow the seeds of continuous disruption by raising the majimbo bogey which was then implanted so deeply that it keeps on being raised. The greed for power and to maintain power made some people go to the extent of using binding oaths or issuing tribal declarations against other Kenyans. Moi professes Christianity and in the early 1960s

was one of those who bought the majimbo argument although he became president by identifying with the anti-majimbo nationalists once Kenya became independent. By instituting what essentially became the *ideology of the fimbo*, he created tension between his government and the citizens of Kenya. That tension is frequently reduced or diffused by the intervention of the religious bodies although they do not speak with one voice. They have tried to contain conflicts.

Notes

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3. John Baur. **2000 years of Christianity in African History 62-1992**(Nairobi Paulines Publications Africa, 1994).p. 279
4. Ibid., p. 281
5. Macharia Munene, "Inter cultural Conflict: the Fight Over Female Circumcision, 1914-1932. MILA Vol. .in 1996, pp. 73-76
8. Munene, "Inter cultural Conflict," p. 73-75.
9. Robert Maxon, **Struggle For Kenya**
10. Munene, "Intercultural Conflict," pp. 79-85

11. Baur, **2000 Years**. p. 285
- 12 Michael Blundell. **A Love Affair With the Sun A Memoir of Seventy Years in Kenya** (Nairobi Kenway Publications. 1994),p. 115
- 13 Wilfred B. Havelock Letter to the Editor, 'Of Majimboism at Independence." **Daily Nation**. July 24, 1994.
- 14 Onesmus K Mutungi, **The legal Aspects of Witchcraft in East Africa With Particular Reference to Kenya** (Nairobi: East African Lit Bureau, 1977), p. xviii.
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- 17 Moi, Kenya **African Nationalism** pp 21-22 2
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- 20 Moi. **Kenyan African Nationalism**, pp. 131-132
- 21 Quote in African Analysis March 17, 1989, p. 10
- 22 Weekly Review, January 6, 1989, p. 18
- 23 **The Weekly Review**. August 17. 1990. pp 4-11

- 24 G. Macharia Munene, "The Diplomatic Collision Course. The U S and Kenya in the Post-Cold War Period 1988-1991," in P. Godfrey Okoth and Patrick Kakwenzire. editors, **The Americas Before And After Columbus** [Kampala: USIS. 1993]. p 89.
- 25 Quote in **FINANCE** September 1990. p. 12
- 26 Gitobu Imanyara and Wachira Maina. **What Future Kenya Nairobi Law Monthly** October 1991. p 19; Africa watch Divide and Rule: State Sponsored Ethnic violence in Kenya. ,September 1993.
- 27 "Towards the KAMATUSA State: A Chronology of Misdeeds,, **FINANCE**, October 15, 1994. p. 32; Africa Watch, "Divide and Rule."
- 28 Quote in the Nairobi Monthly October 1991,p.15
- 29 **FINANCE** October 15,1994 .pp.32-35.