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The coloniser or the missionary? Identity crisis as a conflict in Biblical reception among the Agĩkũyũ of Central Kenya

ABSTRACT

The Bible was a new phenomenon among African cultures that treasure the oral traditions governing their moral and spiritual life. Many African communities were reluctant to welcome the biblical discourse because it not only disagreed with traditional African religious practices, but it was also imposed on them by foreigners laden with negative political motives. This article examines the difficulty of distinguishing between the coloniser and the missionary as an initial conflict in biblical reception among the Agĩkũyũ of central Kenya. The article analyses how the missionaries inculcated the biblical message and how the Agĩkũyũ gradually shifted from their initial belief that “there is no difference between a White coloniser and a White missionary” to a friendly relationship with missionaries and acceptance of Christianity. To explore these dynamics, the article employs witness accounts from African scholars, intertextual analysis of texts regarding Agĩkũyũ beliefs, and biblical texts. The article contends that there was a conflict in biblical reception among the Agĩkũyũ because of the initial challenge of distinguishing British colonialists from missionaries. The results will contribute to understanding the dynamics of conflict in the reception of the biblical discourse and the reception of people by others in the world nowadays.



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1. INTRODUCTION

“When the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land, and the missionaries had the Bible.”¹ The Agĩkũyũ of central Kenya is a Bantu-speaking community that forms one of the major tribes in Kenya. They were mainly agriculturalists. In the pre-colonial period, they were a highly religious people. The basic pillars of the Agĩkũyũ’s social-religious identity were their relationship with their deity, the family unit, and the moral heritage. The socio-religious traditions of the Agĩkũyũ were transmitted orally from one generation to another (Cagnolo 2006:15-20). I briefly highlight these three pillars to know who the Agĩkũyũ are, as I attempt to discuss the initial crisis in biblical reception in this community.

From time immemorial, the Agĩkũyũ believed in the existence of one God (*Ngai*), whose name means the one who divides or distributes; he is thus the source of all blessings and the creator (*Mũmbi*) of all things (Kenyatta 1938:3). The God of the Agĩkũyũ was believed to inhabit some mountains that are regarded as sacred spaces for prayer and sacrifices (Kenyatta 1938:234, 236). Therefore, nature was a sign of divine presence and work. Every cultural activity among the Agĩkũyũ was carried out in connection with their deity.

As in other African societies, the family, as the basic unit of the Agĩkũyũ community, was a network of the relations of three groups that form the Agĩkũyũ family, namely the unborn, the living, and the dead (Leakey 1977; Wachege & Fancy 2017:25). In this vein, life was sacred whether for the unborn, the living, or the dead whose death, the Agĩkũyũ believed, did not amount to annihilation; they were counted as part of the family (Cagnolo 2006:49-53). Once a child was born, s/he was named after the dead relatives to keep their memory alive in the newborn. The family chain continued in the naming process. Their kinship system was composed of the family (nuclear and extended; *mbarĩ*), the sub-clan and the clan (*mũhĩrĩga*), as well as the age groups (*riika*) (Kenyatta 1938:1-3). The administrative work was in the hands of the council of elders. The Agĩkũyũ family was a centre of religion and education (Kenyatta 1938; Wachege & Fancy 2017:25).

Moral values were at the centre of the community’s daily life, and this was a primary link between the individual and the deity. Only moral standing enabled one to form a relationship with God. Spiritual and moral life were intrinsically linked in the life of the Agĩkũyũ. Religious, family, and moral values were handed down through oral teaching within the family

1 Mbuvi (2017:159) writes that this quotation has been popularly attributed to Kenya’s first president, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, to express the relationship between the African and the missionary on biblical reception.

space (Wachege & Fancy 2017:25-26). The family was the school of moral and religious values. One would argue that family was the liminal space for the life of each member of the Agĩkũyũ community.

This article examines the difficulty of distinguishing between the coloniser and the missionary as an initial conflict in biblical reception among the Agĩkũyũ. First, this article explores the initial contact of the Agĩkũyũ with the colonisers and the missionaries and notes how both were received in the Agĩkũyũ land. Secondly, it discusses the perceived unhealthy alliance between the coloniser and the missionary, arguing that this led to a distorted image of the missionary as a collaborator in colonisation rather than a bearer of the biblical message. This is followed by a study of certain links between the Agĩkũyũ teachings and biblical teachings which helped clear the Agĩkũyũ's image of the missionary and opened the door for biblical reception. The next section explores some of the ways in which the missionary broke away from the coloniser and immersed him-/herself into the Agĩkũyũ community through the establishment of social institutions and participation in their daily life. Finally, based on the study, the article offers proposals on how biblical reception can be achieved nowadays among communities, and how people can receive others in their communities and countries in the world in this day and age.

2. CONTACT OF THE AGĨKŪYŪ WITH THE COLONISERS AND THE MISSIONARIES

Kenya was under the British East Africa protectorate from 1895 after the Berlin conference (1884), at which colonial powers divided the African continent into states. The Imperial British East Africa company was the administering authority of the British sphere. It was led by Sr. William Mackinnon (Gathogo 2020:2). The British Protectorate was pronounced a British colony from 1920 until the attainment of independence in 1963. By 1890, British colonisers had invaded the Agĩkũyũ land (Presley 2018:3-4). British colonialism created a set of conditions that escalated conflict with the local people.

The entry of the missionaries into East Africa began before the colonial time, with the coming of Ludwig Krapf in 1844. The first catholic missionaries who arrived in Agĩkũyũ land in 1899 were the Holy Ghost missionaries in Nairobi who were received by Chief Kĩnyanjui wa Gathirimũ. They were followed by the Consolata missionaries who had their first encounter with the Agĩkũyũ at Tuthũ in 1902 and who were received by Chief Karũri wa Gakure (Cagnolo 2006:24). The African Scottish Industrial Mission, later

called the Church of Scotland mission, came to Agĩkũyũ land in 1898 and the Church Missionary Society and African Inland Mission in 1901 (Kang'ethe 1988:28-29).

According to a number of scholars, the major conflict between the Agĩkũyũ and the British colonisers was the question of land. The elders realised that the major concern for the coloniser was to acquire their land, following the East Africa Land Regulations adopted in 1887 (Gathogo 2020:2, 6, 9-10; Kariuki 2022:14-15). The Agĩkũyũ depended on agriculture and the rearing of livestock. European settlers started arriving in Kenya for large-scale farming, which meant deprivation of their land. Kenyatta (1938:26) opines that the Europeans coined the concept of land as being government property in view of driving away the original owners of the land. The government also imposed taxation, which brought about forced labour to enable them to pay taxes to the British protectorate. They used military force to enact their expedition which included burning houses and livestock (Muriuki 1974:145-155). Thus, it can be argued that the Agĩkũyũ believed that the colonisers' aim was to turn them into slaves in their land and they were never interested in evangelisation by the European missionaries.

Another area of conflict between colonial rule and the Agĩkũyũ was about leadership. The Agĩkũyũ were governed by the council of elders, which first tried to build a relationship between the colonisers and the Agĩkũyũ administration. This relationship was initiated by some European explorers and colonial administrators such as F. Lugard. An oath of brotherhood² was taken between Waiyaki wa Hinga, the then paramount leader of the Southern Agĩkũyũ of Kiambu, and Count Teleki and his caravan in 1887. In 1890, Captain F. Lugard and G. Wilson also came to Waiyaki and his people and entered a blood-brotherhood (Lugard 1893:326).³ The oath was to signify unity between the settlers and the Agĩkũyũ. However, according to some authors, this oath was breached when Waiyaki was killed by the

2 The oath of brotherhood was a ritual through which a foreigner was "born" into the clan. The one who is being born ritually drew blood from his body, from the chest or the heel and the community member who was to receive that person had to drink that blood. The new member was also to taste the blood of the one who is welcoming him into the clan. Therefore, it was a blood exchange ritual. It was crowned by a goat sacrifice, and it was a perpetual ritual (Kenyatta 1938).

3 Count Sámuel Teleki was a Hungarian explorer who led the first expedition to Northern Kenya. He set out from Tanzania in February 1887 in the company of an Austrian naval officer, Ludwig von Höhnel. They climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro and Mt. Kenya in March 1887. Fredrick Lugard was a British colonial administrator who greatly influenced British colonial policy by exercising control centrally through native rulers and by respecting native legal systems and customs. William Grey-Wilson was also a British colonial administrator (Muriuki 1974:138-142). On Imperial British East African Company leaders, see McDermont (1895).

colonisers in 1892 (Kang’ethe 1988:27-28; Kariuki 2022:15). For a short period, the colonial heads used the Agĩkũyũ elders, as was the case in other African communities, in their administrative work, by involving them in the maintenance of public order, as judges in local trivial cases of conflict, and in the collection of hut taxes (Presley 2018:3-4). However, this meant that those Agĩkũyũ leaders pledged their loyalty no longer to the community but to the foreigners who were regarded as exploiting and enslaving the people (Gathogo 2012:86). Colonialists carried out expeditions in Agĩkũyũ land, where hundreds were massacred, villages burnt, and crops and livestock taken or destroyed (Kang’ethe 1988:28). Rather than building a cordial relationship, this led to a rift in Agĩkũyũ land.

The colonisers tried to drive a wedge in the Agĩkũyũ community by befriending more of the protestant missionaries when they realised that the Catholic missionaries were more welcomed in Agĩkũyũ land. Such a scheme could eventually divide the community between those who converted to Catholicism and those who converted to Protestantism (Kariuki 2022:54-55). This was their effort to enforce the divide-and-rule policy. Although the scheme did not bear much fruit, it was still an obstacle to the evangelisation mission.

3. ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE COLONISER AND THE MISSIONARY

“*Gũtirĩ mũthũngũ na Mũbĩa*” (translation: there is no difference between a White-man coloniser and a White missionary).⁴ This section explores some of the areas that caused the initial conflict between the Agĩkũyũ and the European missionaries in biblical reception based on their relationship with the European colonisers and their perceived common interests. The Agĩkũyũ’s image of the missionary was distorted because they saw an alliance in the interests of the colonisers and the missionaries, to be discussed below. The missions were set up at the time when the colonisers continued with punitive expeditions in Agĩkũyũ land (Kang’ethe 1988:29). According to Smith (1980:19), the missionaries had to stick together with the settlers because they were few in a strange land and the harsh living conditions in tropical Africa. Similarly, Mbuvi (2017:158) argues that the collusion of European missionaries and colonisers “solidified for the colonised, the imperialising role of the Gospel as part of the colonial project”. This paper argues that the Agĩkũyũ had to overcome this hurdle if they were to receive the Bible.

4 The title *Mũbĩa* was used to refer to the Catholic priest but the proverb was generally used in identifying the White missionary (not only Catholic) with the White coloniser.

3.1 The Agĩkũyũ land

With the question of land acquisition, the Agĩkũyũ saw an unholy alliance between the colonisers and the missionaries since both needed land for their settlement. The missionaries thought that, through a cordial relationship with the European settlers in Agĩkũyũ land, they could civilise the Agĩkũyũ, while the colonisers' government "claimed to itself the land rights all over the country" (Cagnolo 2006:30). The colonisers believed in the integration of what was called the 3Cs as proposed by Dr Livingstone,⁵ namely Christianity, commerce, and civilisation (Gathogo 2020:7). The colonisers somehow controlled the production and consumption of food, as well as the trade. The following statement is attributed to Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, on the relationship between land and the Bible: "When the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land, and the missionaries had the Bible" (Mbuvi 2017:159). This was the basis of resistance, as the Agĩkũyũ had to safeguard their land, their most precious heritage.

Gathogo (2020:5-6) avers that the colonisers created African reserves, which meant that the Agĩkũyũ were forced to live in designated reserves, while the rest of the land was for the settlers, the so-called white highlands in Agĩkũyũ land of Murang'a, Nyeri, Nanyuki, Kiambu, and some parts of the Rift Valley region. The missionaries had to be allocated land to build mission centres consisting of schools, churches, and hospitals. While the settlers and the colonisers were acquiring land for their own edification and leisure activities such as clubs (golf, cricket), the missionaries were to use the land for the benefit of the locals. However, the initial conflict was the means to acquire that land. Some missionaries used the colonisers to cause the Agĩkũyũ people to relinquish land for the mission, by forcing them to live in the reserves. In this way, the missionary was viewed as a collaborator in land theft. The colonisers awarded the settlers and missions generous tracts of land which were not relinquished freely by the locals. The missionaries did not condemn the forceful land acquisition; they received the land and went on to build their missions (Sundkler & Steed 2004:559).

According to Gathogo (2020:7), the missionaries did not intend to exploit the African resources, but they were seeking support to improve the prevailing environment that was not conducive to their evangelical work. In my perspective, however, since both were seen to deprive the Agĩkũyũ of their most precious possession, that is land, the people were hesitant to

5 Dr David Livingstone was a Scottish missionary and explorer who advocated for legitimate trade at the Atlantic coast, in order to undercut the slave trade.

befriend the missionaries just as they were against the colonisers. For the Africans, land was their primary means of production (Lonsdale & Berman 1979:500-501). Sundkler and Steed (2004:559) posit the following:

The impression remained: foreign missions were 'grabbers' of the people's land. Much of the tough resistance against the missions in the Kenya highlands at that time and later, was rooted in this fundamental question of land.

The land question was also linked to the education system. The missionaries oversaw the opening of schools. However, the quest for education in African society further caused the missionaries to collaborate with the colonial government for financial support. Although the locals were eager to learn, the missionaries risked losing their autonomy, due to their connection to the colonisers, thus risking their reception by the local populace (Gathogo 2020:12-13). In some way, the education offered by the missionaries was beneficial, not only to the people, but also to the colonisers and the settlers who hired the Agĩkũyũ for cheap labour.

On the question of land, any form of alliance between the colonisers and the missionaries was unacceptable to the locals. This led to the famous Agĩkũyũ proverb "*Gũtirĩ mũthũngũ na Mũbĩa*", and so they had to fight them both (Kang'ethe 1988:34).

3.2 Forced labour

Land deprivation was linked to forced labour (Okia 2012). With taxes imposed by the colonial heads, the fathers in families were forced to work on the farms of the European settlers and for the missionaries to provide for their families and pay taxes (Gathogo 2012:86). Consequently, the missionary was viewed as a collaborator with the coloniser in the dehumanisation of the Agĩkũyũ people. On the one hand, the employment offered in the mission centres was a way of uplifting the family's living. On the other hand, this was the only option for the family heads since their land, as a source of income, was taken by the settlers and part thereof allotted to the missionaries.

The employment centres were also areas of violence where people were cruelly treated and abused (Okia 2012). This is attested to across the African labour force in colonial Kenya.

While the technical rate of labour exploitation remained low, with inexperienced labour gangs working under inefficient management whose language they did not understand, the conditions of exploitation were arbitrary and harsh (Lonsdale & Berman 1979:501).

This cruelty was happening while the missionaries were still present in Agĩkũyũ land. There is also evidence of some missionaries, especially protestants, who later became large-scale farmers like their fellow European settlers (Gathogo 2020:8-9). This implied that they could not be distinguished from the cruel and abusive settlers. The missionaries could not be declared clean in their endeavour to evangelise, as some were directly linked to those who were enslaving the Agĩkũyũ farmers. Consequently, “*Gũtirĩ mũthũngũ na Mũbĩã*”.

3.3 Controversy over cultural values

The Agĩkũyũ were convinced that the colonisers came to devalue their religious and moral heritage. Initially, the issue of inculcating civilisation in Agĩkũyũ land was not taken in a positive sense. For the Europeans, civilisation meant that the Agĩkũyũ were primitive and needed to be taught values. They believed in the superiority of their White civilisation (Gladwin 2017:282, 287). According to Kenyatta (1938:269), “as far as religion is concerned, the African was regarded as a clean slate”. At first, the missionaries believed that they were coming to save a people without any religious values and to change their entire indigenous mindset. Therefore, the Gospel of Christ was to become everything to empty souls (Gathogo 2020:8). Some colonisers and missionaries downplayed the Agĩkũyũ concept of God (*Ngai*), terming it as rudimentary. They were hesitant to accept that *Ngai* was the same as the Christian God (Kang’ethe 1988:30-31). This prejudiced idea provoked resistance from the Agĩkũyũ community. In my view, the prejudice was from both sides, not as some view the missionaries as the problem. The Agĩkũyũ also believed that their long-heralded values were above those of the Whites. Therefore, the conflict was also the result of the Agĩkũyũ rigidity to comprehend the missionaries’ teachings, which ultimately enriched the Agĩkũyũ lifestyle.

The Agĩkũyũ religious and social values were heralded down orally through the family unit. The parents were the key custodians of the tribal teaching and were to educate the children. In this regard, the Agĩkũyũ were not *tabula rasa* in matters of religion and morality. Their “cultural gospel” was transmitted orally. Kariuki (2022:32) confirms that “the Agĩkũyũ were not atheists before the coming of the missionaries”. The conflict with the Europeans was that the missionaries came with the written Gospel, while the colonisers used written laws to implement their policies. Thus, both the coloniser and the missionary viewed the locals as ignorant. The missionaries argued that the low moral level of the Agĩkũyũ was manifested in their language. They argued that words that could properly express religious concepts such as love, faith, forgiveness, and sin were non-existent. This

was obviously ignorance on their part until they became conversant with the language. They condemned the tribal taboos and rights especially on family life and religion that they could not understand rather than taking time to learn from the local community (Kenyatta 1938:269, 271).

One of the cultural practices condemned by several mission societies such as the Church of Scotland and the Africa Inland Mission was female circumcision which led converts to openly break with the church (Sundkler & Steed 2004:889; Presley 2018:89-93). As argued by Kanogo (2005:73-74), most of the time the missionaries and the colonial government overlooked the more complex process of initiation that precedes and follows the surgery as the essence of the Agĩkũyũ *Irua* ceremony (translated in English as circumcision, although the word does not capture the entire process) (Kenyatta 1938:130-154).⁶ Thus, the rite was politicised (Kang'ethe 1988:32-33). The Agĩkũyũ later abandoned female circumcision. It can be argued that the later abandonment could reflect that its value was lost. In my understanding, some of the beliefs associated with the rite were insignificant and mythical, yielding to its abandonment, and I would not be too harsh in condemning the missionaries' attitude towards the rite.

The missionaries misunderstood the value of dowry during the marriage process. They thought that dowry was tantamount to buying the girl, which is far from the Agĩkũyũ customs and purpose for the same. Colonial officials tried to institute laws to limit dowry payments. This was opposed by the Agĩkũyũ chiefs. For the Agĩkũyũ and many other African communities, one can never buy the girl. Dowry payment was simply a gesture of thanksgiving and unification of two families (Kanogo 2005:105-106).

For the Agĩkũyũ, the spoken word was authoritative whether in matters of law or teaching, while the coloniser and the missionary focused on the written word. The Agĩkũyũ philosophy of life and ethics were enshrined in proverbs and maxims written in their hearts (Waweru *et al.* 2022:106). To accept the missionary, who, in the Agĩkũyũ's view, was in alliance with the coloniser, required them to differentiate the means of civilisation taken by both. Some believed that the Europeans envisioned changing the Agĩkũyũ through formal education. Although formal education was an initial point of conflict, as argued by some scholars, many were ready to have their children learn the new education. Therefore, I do not view it as a major point of conflict, as argued by some scholars. Formal education became a breakthrough in biblical reception.

6 The Agĩkũyũ believed that an uncircumcised boy or girl would remain barren. They also believed that circumcision decreased female sexual passion, and preserved virginity and extra-marital chastity (Cagnolo 2006:82-83).

The colonisers supported the missionaries in their educational endeavour because they believed that they would train faithful servants, especially for the settlers who owned large tracks of land requiring submissive workers (Gathogo 2012:86). The missionaries could also use the British colonial leaders who had the machinery to coerce the people into such socially changing matters as education and evangelisation. Such a relationship between the British governance and the missionaries would contribute to the initial crisis of differentiating the coloniser from the missionary. It led to a spirit of cultural nationalism and patriotism. Groups and political parties arose to defend the Agĩkũyũ culture and customs. For example, institutions such as Kikuyu Central Association, Progressive Kikuyu Party, *Karing'a* and *Arathi* groups (Kang'ethe 1988:35-38), as well as African independent schools and churches (Kenyatta 1938:273-274) were, in response to the coloniser-missionary communion, a great setback in biblical reception. From the sources explored, I would argue that the Agĩkũyũ were generally suspicious of the Europeans. They naturally suspected the missionaries to be either government spies or agents, even when they genuinely wanted to open missions and evangelise.

4. OVERCOMING THE COLONISER – MISSIONARY IDENTITY CRISIS

The conflict that arose in the Agĩkũyũ reception of the missionaries and the biblical message, due to the apparent relationship between the coloniser and the missionary, and the distorted view of the socio-religious values of the Agĩkũyũ, led to the need to seek answers in the Bible that was being presented to them. The missionaries had to find a way to immerse themselves in the culture, in order to win the hearts of the chiefs and the entire community. I present certain areas of unity and relationship between Agĩkũyũ traditional beliefs and scriptural teaching, before taking selected activities used by the missionaries to build a relationship with the Agĩkũyũ and to detach themselves from the colonisers.

4.1 The link between Agĩkũyũ teachings and biblical teachings

There are several areas of relationship between the Agĩkũyũ and the biblical teaching which can be regarded, in my view, as *praeparatio evangelica*, borrowing from the words of Eusebius of Caesarea. Due to the limits of this article, I focus on three areas, namely the concept of God, the sacredness of life, and the priesthood. These were some of the primary concepts that allowed the missionaries to be later welcomed into the Agĩkũyũ community after the locals realised that they had something in common

with what these missionaries were propagating. If the missionaries had initially taken time to understand such concepts, biblical reception could have been easier.

4.1.1 The concept of God

The Agĩkũyũ can be termed a monotheistic community who believed in the existence of a supernatural deity, and only this deity was worthy of being beseeched and worshipped (Kenyatta 1938:231-232; Cagnolo 2006:26-27). The concept “monotheism” is well enshrined in the biblical narrative and the life of Israel, especially from the Babylonian exile period (Dt. 4:35.39; Is. 45:21-22; Markl 2020). The Agĩkũyũ believed that God is the primary giver of their teachings, which links to the giving of the Decalogue on Mount Sinai. They likened the ten commandments to their prohibitions (*mĩgiro*) that define the relationship between man and God, and between man and man. Some proverbs are linked to the Decalogue.⁷ Similarly, the basic requirement to worship the One God, to honour his name, and to shun all idolatry, as expressed in the first commandment (Ex. 20:1-5), is something rooted in the Agĩkũyũ traditional religion (Waweru *et al.* 2022:105, 109). The missionaries had to understand that the Agĩkũyũ worshipped God and not ancestors, as some had initially misunderstood (Kenyatta 1938).

On God’s attributes, the Agĩkũyũ believed in the two faces of God in the first commandment, a God who is merciful and gracious, and a God who does not free the guilty without punishment. Therefore, the “grace formula” in Exodus 34:6-7 (Markl 2018) is well inscribed in the Agĩkũyũ concept of God. On the one hand, he is a God who is merciful, gracious, and forgiving. On the other, they believed that God is angered by those who behave wickedly, and he brings both blessing and punishment (Kenyatta 1938:236). Various catastrophes and epidemics in Agĩkũyũ land were attributed to God’s hand if the people were unfaithful to him. The greatest blessing that the Agĩkũyũ as a community attributed to God is the gift of land. This rhymes with the concept of the promised land in the Hebrew Bible. The Agĩkũyũ believed that God is the giver of the land on which they inhabit to this date. The land was given to their first ancestors *Gĩkũyũ* and *Mũmbi* (Kenyatta 1938). This concept of the first ancestors echoes the story of Adam and Eve. This land has an abundance (*bũũthi*), a land that lacks no rain, and rain represents blessings.

7 *Kangĩrega nyina gatihonaga* (Literal translation: The baby that refuses its mother’s breast will never be full.). This proverb teaches one to honour one’s parents, otherwise one will be ruined. On theft, one who was caught stealing was burnt alive with dry banana leaves (*magayũ*). The Agĩkũyũ never not allowed worship of any other god apart from *Ngai*. These are some examples that show a link between the Decalogue and Agĩkũyũ prohibitions.

The God of the Agĩkũyũ lives in heaven but has temporary homes situated in four mountains that are sacred (Mbiti 1969:94-95). Kenyatta (1938:234) affirms that the first and official dwelling place for the Agĩkũyũ deity is Mount *Kerenyaga*, which literally means mountain of brightness. Currently, this mountain is known as Mount Kenya. Linked to this mountain, the Agĩkũyũ also call their God *Mwene nyaga*. The other minor abodes of *Ngai* are *Kianjahĩ* (the mountain of the big rain); *Kiambiroiro* (the mountain of the clear sky), and *Kianyandarwa* (the mountain of hides or sleeping places). Apart from the mountains, the Agĩkũyũ had sacred trees, generally *Mũgumo* or *Mũtamaiyo* and *Mũkũyũ*, where they could offer prayers and sacrifices. These trees, like the mountains, were regarded as God's abode (Kenyatta 1938:236).

The concept of the mountain as God's dwelling is rooted in the Exodus tradition. God met with his people at Mount Sinai, also referred to as Mount Horeb (Dt. 1:6, 4:15, 18:16). The mountain serves as a landmark for divine presence, especially in the theophany (Ex. 19, 20:18-19). The Agĩkũyũ believed that some of the theophanic signs in the Bible such as thunder and lightning represented God's acts and weaponry (Kenyatta 1938:237-238). The motif of the mountain of God in various biblical texts emphasises the reality of the mountain as the dwelling or meeting point of God with his people (Num. 10:33; 1 Ki. 8:29-30, 19:11-18; Is. 2:2-3; Pss. 26:5, 76:3). The Agĩkũyũ prayed facing Mount *Kerenyaga* and offered sacrifices at the foot of the mountain and under the sacred trees.

For an encounter with their God, the Agĩkũyũ believed in the need for purification through animal sacrifice (*Ndakĩhio*) (Waweru *et al.* 2022:107-108; Cagnolo 2006:152-153). The designated persons, especially the fathers of the families, would require purification before coming to meet with God in prayer and supplication. Holiness is also demanded in the biblical text before Israel would meet God (Ex. 19:9-25). They were to be holy just like their God (Lev. 19:2). Moses was commissioned to go and consecrate the people just as purification in the Agĩkũyũ custom was mediated by a medicine man (*Mũndũ Mũgo*) who was believed to have that capacity from their God and ancestors (Kenyatta 1938:237). On the concept of God, as Mbiti (1980) noted, the missionaries did not come to bring God. For the Agĩkũyũ, the belief in God and their way of worship stood out as a basis for biblical reception and interpretation.

4.1.2 The sacredness of life

In the Agĩkũyũ social and religious pedagogy, life is sacred, a gift from God, and only he has the power to take it from the human being. Although the Agĩkũyũ had high regard for the dead, death was never celebrated,

and funeral rites were very rare (see Cagnolo 2006:150-152). As Mbiti (2000) notes, the arrival of a child for African people was one of the greatest blessings of life. According to Cagnolo (2006:57), “to be childless was the worst fate for Agĩkũyũ women”. The more children one had, the more blessings. Therefore, the violator of the sanctity of life was severely punished, including expulsion from the community and requiring a rite of purification (*gũtahĩkio*) to be reinstated in the community (Waweru et al. 2022:104; Cagnolo 2006:167). The process of purification involved an animal sacrifice as in the Bible (Lev. 4:14-15).

To perpetuate life, the Agĩkũyũ believed in building a strong family entity that goes beyond the nuclear family to the extended family. Within the family setting, the culture of life was instilled into all the members of the family (Wachege & Fancy 2017:25-26). In safeguarding the dignity of life right from conception, several taboos concerning pregnant women were imposed that could not be transgressed, so that the mother and the unborn child should in no way be endangered (Kenyatta 1938:240). The unborn and the dead are members of the family. I believe that the Agĩkũyũ concept of life can be argued to be a point of encounter with the biblical message. Just like the Agĩkũyũ believed in the sacredness of life, having its origin and end in God, so it is in the biblical text. The Decalogue outrightly condemns killing (Ex. 20:13; Dt. 5:17). One of the sins that cry to God is the pouring of innocent blood (Gn. 4:10). The Torah prescribes the punishment to be executed against anyone who violated the sanctity of life or disrespected vulnerable groups (Ex. 21:12-22, 22:22-23).

There was a challenge in accepting the missionary concept of monogamy as prescribed in the Gospel of Christ. Missionaries insisted that those who converted to Christianity must abandon polygamy and embrace monogamy. However, the Agĩkũyũ found the idea of polygamy in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, patriarchal narratives. Unfortunately, the missionaries did not adequately address this issue. For the Agĩkũyũ, polygamy in the Bible was a point of relation to their customs (Kenyatta 1938:271). They had no problem accepting the biblical message that has key figures such as Jacob, David, and Solomon who were polygamous. Although, to the Agĩkũyũ, polygamy is attested in the Bible, there is still the challenge of integrating polygamy in the Agĩkũyũ Christians to this day.

4.1.3 The priesthood

To maintain a close relationship with their deity, the Agĩkũyũ community had high regard for the institution of the priesthood. The priest is the intermediary between the living and the dead, and between the living and the deity. As a religious community, the Agĩkũyũ were always in

communion with God through prayers and sacrifices. While prayers could be offered anytime and anywhere, the sacrifices required the presence of the traditional priest. Specific sacrifices were offered at a designated place, either under the sacred tree or on the sacred mountain (Kenyatta 1938). Sacrifices were made to God in a joint communion between the living and the ancestors. The primary requirement of the priest was holiness before approaching the deity. Thus, the men who led in the sacrifice were to abstain from all sexual relations days before they appeared before the deity (Kariuki 2022). In my view, the Agĩkũyũ concept of priesthood is not far from the biblical concept. The priest has been consecrated among the rest of the community of Israel and holiness is demanded of him. Only a priest could approach the tent of meeting (Lev. 10:6-11). The priesthood was passed on from generation to generation. In the Torah, Aaron and his family were designated for the office of priesthood, given to them as a gift from the Lord (Ex. 29:8-9; Num. 18:1-7).

A good relationship developed between the Catholic priest and the Agĩkũyũ chiefs, who ultimately welcomed them into their community. They observed the Catholic priest keenly and how he conducted his sacrifice. They noticed some areas of similarities with what the Agĩkũyũ priest (*Mũndũ Mũgo*) did, and how he offered his sacrifices (*Magongona*) (Waweru et al. 2022:103). The Catholic priest had no wife and abstained from all sexual relations. For the Agĩkũyũ, this was likened to sexual abstinence by their priests before they went out to offer sacrifice. Agĩkũyũ priests had to keep away from their wives to guarantee purity before approaching their deity. Secondly, Catholic priesthood was for men; only a male was ordained. This related to the Agĩkũyũ priests, an office reserved solely for men. The Agĩkũyũ could not allow women to enter the sacred area where the sacrifice is offered, just as the Catholic priest had no women in the sanctuary (Kariuki 2022:29-30).

From the above analysis, the concept of God, the sanctity of life, and the nature of priesthood can be taken as preparatory areas that could have aided in biblical reception. After an unprejudiced interaction between the missionaries and the Agĩkũyũ, these were substantial aids in biblical reception and interpretation.

4.2 The missionary breakaway from the coloniser

The prevalent belief by the Agĩkũyũ, as expressed in the proverb “*Gũtiri mũthũngũ na mũbĩã*”, led the missionaries to invent ways in which the Agĩkũyũ would regard them differently from the colonisers and the settlers. As attested by Gathogo (2020:5), the effort to build a cordial relationship with the Agĩkũyũ was more vividly observed with the Catholic missionaries

than with the Protestant missionaries. Their basic plan was to establish institutions that would benefit the community in general. One might argue that, through these institutions, the missionaries were able to nurture a good image and become dissociated from colonisers.

4.2.1 Education system

The introduction of formal education was initially viewed as a way of eroding and erasing the Agĩkũyũ orally received and safeguarded values. As Kenyatta (1938:98-129) contends, before the arrival of the missionaries, the Agĩkũyũ had a well-established system of education that ran from birth to death at both the family and the tribe levels. The missionaries only introduced something formal. First, the missionaries took education as an opportunity to educate the Agĩkũyũ children to defend themselves from colonial forced labour. Kariuki (2022:38) argues that there was an agreement between the missionaries and the colonial leaders that all the children who were in the mission schools should be exempted from labour. The missionaries' primary goal of education was basic literacy to aid in their missions (Gathogo 2020:12).

The recognition by the Agĩkũyũ chiefs of the mission schools and their contribution to the life of the community was an opening for the reception of the biblical message. Sundkler and Steed (2004:557, 888) attest that several missionary organisations were ready to give the young generation of men and women some of the education they were seeking. While the colonisers were out to introduce European civilisation by force to the Agĩkũyũ through taxation and forced labour, the missionaries were open to learning the Agĩkũyũ language, Kikuyu. Education was both ways, the missionaries were teaching the Agĩkũyũ while they also learnt from them. As they endeavoured to learn the Kikuyu language, they learnt their cultural values. The missionaries would eat meals in Agĩkũyũ homes, participate in their feasts, and treat their sick. Having learnt the language, the missionaries spearheaded the translation of liturgical books and the Bible into the Kikuyu language. Learning the language was a means of grasping the Agĩkũyũ culture. Since colonisers were not interested in learning the Kikuyu language, missionaries were viewed as valuing the Agĩkũyũ and their culture transmitted through language.

4.2.2 Immersion in the community

Catholic missionaries sought ways to be immersed in the community and be regarded as brothers and sisters. The Consolata missionaries are said to have a knack for adapting to local customs that other missions had not adapted (Sundkler & Steed 2004:560). The Agĩkũyũ elders agreed to

assimilate the missionaries into the community through a solemn oath known as *Gũciarwo na Mbũri* (to be born through a goat offering), which meant that they would have a full right to buy land and establish mission centres (Kariuki 2022:97; Kenyatta 1938:22). Therefore, missionaries could not be regarded as strangers who deprived locals of their land. Having built a relationship with the help of the Agĩkũyũ leaders, the local people could even donate land for mission expansion (Gathogo 2020:14). Since the Agĩkũyũ are agricultural people, one of the main reasons for their initial resistance to both the missionaries and the colonisers was the question of land. The missionaries immersed themselves by introducing crops, especially coffee, which eventually became a cash crop in a large part of central Kenya (Sundkler & Steed 2004:559).

There was a point of conflict on the issue of female circumcision. Kanogo (2005:78) states that the Catholic Church was reconciliatory. To show their understanding of the social values of the Agĩkũyũ, they helped prepare girls, especially from poor families, for circumcision since they believed that it has no effect on matters of faith. From the author's perspective, this was an effort by the missionaries to accommodate the Agĩkũyũ customs.

4.2.3 Health system

The missionaries found that the Agĩkũyũ had their ways and means of treating diseases. Some initially questioned their medical practices before they understood the procedure followed by the traditional medicine men (Kenyatta 1938:280-283; Gathogo 2012:87). However, missionaries were a great help when they introduced health facilities in their mission areas that played a great role in collaboration with the community volunteers to combat various diseases in the community. Rather than condemning their local medicine, Catholic missionaries taught the need for better health and introduced the Agĩkũyũ to their health practices, which went a long way in building a cordial relationship with the people. The health facilities were also a source of employment for the locals.

5. THE WAY FORWARD

Having built a relationship with the Agĩkũyũ, their leaders, and the community, the missionaries' work became easier. The reception of the Bible was first opened by their detachment from the colonisers after they realised that their interest was land and enslaving the Agĩkũyũ with taxation and forced labour. The coloniser-missionary identity crisis gradually faded as soon as the missionaries began to immerse themselves

into the community by learning the Kikuyu language which opened the way to learning their cultural practices. They began to teach the Word of God and to catechise the children and young people in the educational institutions they had opened.

Learning the Kikuyu language spoken by the Agĩkũyũ paved the way for Bible translation. The Agĩkũyũ are among the communities in which the Bible Society of Kenya, whose roots date back to the missionaries, especially Ludwig Krapf (1844), has its Bible in Kikuyu translated integrally (Kinyua 2010:135). Of the first complete Kikuyu Bible to be translated was the *Ibuku ria Ngai*, published in 1965 (Bible Society Kenya 2019). The translation was mainly aided by the missionaries who began the work as early as 1900 (Kinyua 2010:139-143). In a language that speaks to their hearts, the reception of the missionary and the Bible by the Agĩkũyũ was much easier. Even in the contemporary world, language is a basic means of interrelations. By learning the language, one learns the people's culture, way of life, and customs, which should help one accept one another and foster a sense of brotherhood. Just as the missionaries were welcomed for learning the language and the culture of the people, it can be argued that this process of integration and immersion is relevant in relations with different peoples in the present world.

As the missionaries learnt and began appreciating the culture of the Agĩkũyũ, they were able to establish commendable relations with Agĩkũyũ values. This should be the basic path, even currently, especially considering that many remain ignorant of the cultural practices in the name of modernity. Learning the values held by people paves the way for one to feel at home amongst them and their philosophy of life. No culture is superior to the other. Therefore, even the Christian faith must be expressed from within an African religious-cultural perspective (Han & Beyers 2017:6). Those who are entrusted with biblical teaching should be well equipped, by learning the cultural practices of the people. I concur with Mbiti (1978:72) who argues that the African needs to feel at home in his faith whenever Christ is interpreted. Biblical reception and interpretation in Africa must continue to value the realities and customs of African communities:

African biblical scholars see the encounter with African contexts as a watershed moment in the shaping of Christianity beyond the African context (Mbuvi 2017:155).

For better biblical reception, we need to cultivate a culture of reading the Bible which has been translated into local languages. We should make it our book and not a European book. This viewpoint puts an end to what was perceived as a reading and interpretation of the Bible from the

European perspective (Mbuvi 2017:159). We should endeavour to make the Bible our own from the lowest level in the Christian communities to the scholarly level. The biblical message should also address the challenges Africans face in their various countries, in social, religious, and political arenas. Biblical interpretation should address war and violence, poverty and exploitation, religious intolerance, corruption, and many others.

6. CONCLUSION

The reception of the Bible among the Agĩkũyũ of central Kenya was not a smooth task in the initial stages of the missionary activity. In this paper, I argued that the Agĩkũyũ are a religious people, with a strong belief in one God and in moral values that could lay a foundation for the reception of the Bible. However, the perceived collaboration between the colonisers and the missionaries created initial resistance to biblical reception. The missionaries were only able to propagate the Gospel message among the Agĩkũyũ through immersion in the community, learning the language, and adopting local customs. Even currently, for proper biblical reception to occur, we should never ignore the cultural connections and affinities. In Biblical interpretation we should also consider the challenges facing African communities in various communities.

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