“A Household Divided”: A Fragmented Religious Identity, Resistance and the *Mungiki* movement among the Kikuyu in Post-colonial Kenya

Dissertation

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Abstract

Through the study of the Mungiki movement among the Kikuyu of Kenya, this dissertation examines how post-colonial Africans continue to use their cultural backgrounds to negotiate and re-center themselves in a changing world. Underlying this project is the assumption that if enslaved Africans in the New World could draw upon their cultural backgrounds despite the forcible removal from their cultural roots, they would do the same while on the continent. I argue that reactions to post-colonial socio-economic challenges can be better understood by exploring how Africans have used their specific cultural symbols, specifically religious concepts, to cope with the transformations within their societies as a result of their encounter with colonialism and globalization.

A major point of cultural contact between many African communities and Europeans was the Christian Missions. The Kikuyu were no different. Having come into the closest and the longest contact with Christian missionaries compared to other ethnic groups in Kenya, Christianity became a significant part of Kikuyu identity. Nonetheless, rather than being a uniting force, this study points to the divisive effect of Christianity on the Kikuyu, which has become especially evident during times of intense socio-economic turmoil. Because pre-colonial Kikuyu society was significantly gerontocratic, there were inevitable latent tensions within the society that were magnified with the arrival of Christian missionaries in the late 19th–century. The Kikuyu’s conversion to Christianity
marked the beginning of a process of intense religious divisions that became a significant part of Kikuyu identity. This was due to two main factors: First, Christianity signified the possibility of an alternative source of power for the disenfranchised within the society. As such, the lower strata of the Kikuyu society made up the bulk of the first converts into Christianity.¹ Secondly, the fluid and open nature of Kikuyu cultural worldview and the central role of the Kikuyu themselves in the religious inventions accompanying the conversion, led to the emergence of multiple and often-competing Christian ideas within the Kikuyu society. The second impact would be the most lasting of the two. The emerging identity, fragmented along doctrinal and socio-economic lines would become part and parcel of the Kikuyu society and would shape their political action across time. Drawing on my field research on the *Mungiki* movement, I demonstrate that this heritage of a fragmented religious identity has continued to make united political action among the Kikuyu difficult, as they face the challenges of the post-colonial world.

Dedication

To my husband, Scott Stringer

You are my rock
The old adage “it takes a village to raise a child” could not be more applicable to my academic journey. Throughout my graduate school career I have become indebted to numerous individuals, none of whom will I ever be able to repay. The first on the list is my advisor, Dr. Ahmad Sikainga. Thank you for your unwavering support, rigorous academic training, and faith in me. You helped me set goals and then pushed me to achieve them. I could not have become the scholar I have become without you. To my dissertation committee members, Drs. Ousman Kobo and Franco Barchiesi, thank you for taking a more than cursory interest in my project, and for helping me become a better scholar and teacher through your instructions and sterling examples throughout the years.

I would also like to sincerely thank the Ohio State University history department, which has been my home for the last four years. The brilliant instructors, the friends I made, and the very supportive administration all made a huge difference in my doctoral quest. I cannot forget the extensive financial and moral support that the department provided me, without which I would have been unable to complete this dissertation in a timely fashion. The numerous grants and associateships allowed me to travel to Kenya for my fieldwork and write my dissertation with little interruption. The department also made provisions for me to continue with my Graduate Associateship even as I was away from Campus. I will forever be proud to be part of such a department.
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Thank you for always reminding me what I was capable of, and for all the sacrifices you made during our first year of marriage so that I could write this dissertation.

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Fields of Study

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In my Master’s thesis, I sought to link Christianity born and bred in pre-colonial Kongo kingdom to resistance acts among enslaved Africans in 18th- and 19th-century South Carolina. I was intrigued to discover how Africans during this unfortunate period of history continued to draw upon their cultural backgrounds to cope with the vagaries of enslavement. Especially inspiring was an academic project that sought to create a new way of conceiving the relationship between the two locales.

Historians Paul Lovejoy, Robin Law, and Elisée Soumonni led the Nigerian Hinterland Project, a major collaborative research effort aimed at reversing the point of origin from the Americas to Africa in the study of African Diaspora. This endeavor was based on the assumption that enslaved Africans carried their cultures and histories with them. Additionally, it presupposed that it is only by understanding the slaves’ African background could scholars fully appreciate African influences in the Diaspora.²

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One of the proponents of this framework, Kristin Mann, opines that if scholars are ever to understand how, when, and why slaves were able to draw on material, social, and ideological resources from their African backgrounds, those scholars must first understand that African point of origin.\(^3\) She writes:

So far as the African Diaspora is concerned, what we know about the past now requires a model that begins in Africa, traces the movement of specific cohorts of peoples into the Americas and examines how in regionally temporal contexts, they drew on what they brought with them as well as borrowed from what they found in the Americas to forge new Worlds for themselves.\(^4\)

With inspiration from the above paradigm, this dissertation uses the *Mungiki* movement among the Kikuyu of Kenya, to examine how post-colonial Africans have continued to use their cultural backgrounds to negotiate and re-center themselves in a changing world. Underlying this project is the assumption that if enslaved Africans in the New World could draw upon their cultural backgrounds despite the forcible removal from their cultural roots, they would do the same while on the continent. I argue that reactions to post-colonial socio-economic challenges can be better understood by exploring how Africans have used their specific cultural symbols, specifically religious concepts, to cope with the transformations within their societies as a result of their encounter with colonialism and globalization.

A major point of cultural contact between many African communities and Europeans was the Christian Missions. The Kikuyu were no different. Having come into the closest and the longest contact with Christian missionaries compared to other ethnic

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\(^3\) Ibid., 6.

\(^4\) Ibid., 16.
groups in Kenya, Christianity became a significant part of Kikuyu identity. Nonetheless, rather than being a uniting force, this study points to the divisive effect of Christianity on the Kikuyu, which has become especially evident during times of intense socio-economic turmoil. Because pre-colonial Kikuyu society was significantly gerontocratic, there were inevitable latent tensions within the society that were magnified with the arrival of Christian missionaries in the late 19th–century. The Kikuyu’s conversion to Christianity marked the beginning of a process of intense religious divisions that became a significant part of Kikuyu identity. This was due to two main factors: First, Christianity signified the possibility of an alternative source of power for the disenfranchised within the society. As such, the lower strata of the Kikuyu society made up the bulk of the first converts into Christianity. Secondly, the fluid and open nature of Kikuyu cultural worldview and the central role of the Kikuyu themselves in the religious inventions accompanying the conversion, led to the emergence of multiple and often-competing Christian ideas within the Kikuyu society. The second impact would be the most lasting of the two. The emerging identity, fragmented along doctrinal and socio-economic lines would become part and parcel of the Kikuyu society and would shape their political action across time.

Drawing on my field research on the Mungiki movement, I demonstrate that this heritage of a fragmented religious identity has continued to make united political action among the Kikuyu difficult, as they face the challenges of the post-colonial world.

In this endeavor, I find Jean Comaroff’s study of the Tshidi of Southern Africa to be especially instructive. While the Comaroff’s findings on the Tshidi might be uniquely

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South Africa, her methodology and theoretical framework are particularly relevant to the current project. Comaroff contends that it is through cultural symbols that the mediation between structural order and lived experiences occurs, allowing the living actors to make sense of their world. Thus by examining the relationship between these symbols and social structures as they change through time, it is possible to analyze the internal logic of popular consciousness in its later manifestations. She writes:

The relationship between the structural order and the world of everyday experience was mediated by a system of signs, whose silent language conveyed a repertoire of values and predispositions to living actors.\(^6\)

Nonetheless, cultural signs being just that, elements that individuals can assign different meanings to as they engage with their world, are open to diverse interpretations. I argue that these multifaceted interpretations often result in internal strains, which become especially evident in times of intense socio-economic crises. Thus, rather than become a uniting force during times of crises, these cultural continuities and discontinuities become a source of contention as they become reified through lived experiences. In this dissertation I examine how the *Mungiki* movement exemplifies these processes as the Kikuyu engage with post-colonial challenges.

The present study adopts Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar’s “dynamic model of religion” in examining religious conversion among the Kikuyu. Rather than going back to the now worn-out debate of syncretism within African religious practices, the model calls for the examination of how certain products of religious imagination change over time. It thus permits us to understand how Africans assimilated new religious ideas and practices and how and why new religious movements emerge and spread. The dynamic model of religious expressions facilitates our understanding of the undercurrents of African religious practices without being burdened with the task of shifting between “foreign” and “indigenous,” with the understanding that Africans throughout history have actively selected and incorporated elements from the outside world and made them their own. Perhaps nowhere is this active selection more visible than in religiously based protest movements that have continued to emerge and thrive in post-independence Africa.

**Resistance and Religious Movements in the Historiography**

Resistance, covert or otherwise, is a significant component of many African religious movements like the *Mungiki*. There is a consensus among scholars that for a behavior to count as resistance, there needs to be an oppositional element and active behavior, whether physical, verbal, or cognitive, demonstrating this opposition. Thus, to determine whether or not members of a religious movement are engaging in political/resistance acts, James Scott’s concept of *infrapolitics* becomes particularly relevant in this discussion. *Infrapolitics* captures the idea of an “unobtrusive realm of

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political struggle...invisible by design—a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.” Scott contends that infrapolitics provides much of the cultural and structural underpinnings of the more visible political action. Subsequently, in the present study, resistance is any action, collective or individual, overt or covert, that seeks to demonstrate discontent with the status quo. This definition allows me to examine actions that might not be readily recognized as resistance in cases where overt resistance would be neither practical nor prudent. Additionally, it conveys the idea that Africans engage in a broad range of activities not only in reaction to external domination but also to forces within and without their communities. This is especially significant in the case of the Mungiki, whose contention is not only against external domination, but also against other segments of the Kikuyu ethnic group. Moreover, focusing on covert versus overt resistance facilitates our understanding of resistance strategies that employ symbolism drawn from religious traditions.

Resistance against foreign and local hegemonic forces has been a central theme within African history. Scholars like Terrence Ranger, John Illife, and Vittorio Lantenari were among the first to document cases of resistance that emerged during the colonial period. It is noteworthy that almost all of these resistance activities were based on


religious rhetoric. This fact did not escape these scholars, yet they differ in their interpretations of its significance. For some, like Lantenari, religiously based movements were little more than a coping mechanism in the face of intensive and direct colonial exploitation. For others, like Ranger, these movements were but a stage in the evolution of anti-colonial protest, lying between early armed resistance and the rise of modern mass nationalist parties.¹³ To these scholars, religious movements were not in themselves sufficiently political—they were simply either galvanizing force, platform of expression, or alternative to unattainable secular methods of protest.

Nonetheless, instead of ending with colonialism or with increased accessibility to secular means of protest, religious movements in Africa have continued to flourish. It became evident that resistance movements based on religion, were not simply an anti-colonial phenomenon, or merely less sophisticated modes of political action. Not surprisingly then, most of these scholars had to revise their earlier assertions. Lantenari modified his arguments acknowledging the central role of cultural (religious) and psychological factors in the rise of resistance movements, while Ranger now recognized that religious movements grew concurrently with and often independently of nationalist movements.¹⁴ These were key revisions, as they recognized the cultural agency of African actors in expressing their discontent. Thus, it became clear that religious movements needed to be examined as what they are: religious movements. Even with

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these key revisions, by the mid-1970s religious movements were yet to acquire legitimacy within the scholarly world as viable means of resistance. In his response to Audrey Wiper’s study of *Dini Ya Msambwa* in colonial Kenya, Robert Buijtenhuijs asserted that religious movements emerge only when there is a period of cultural upheaval and social destruction, and thus should be seen more as “counter-societies” as opposed to political societies, as they do not seek to conquer existing political powers. For Buijtenhuijs, there was nothing political about religious movements.15 Others viewed religious movements as dangerous alternatives to real politics. In her analysis of rural religious movements, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, a Marxist scholar, wrote the following, “[these movements led] to a retreat to the past where the final atavar engendered veritable ground-swells of religion…more favorable to acceptance than to confrontation.” She further writes that the religious elements in the rural areas were “capable of deviating…even aborting, protest movements of a more modernizing inspiration,” draining them of “dynamic political content.”16 In essence, these movements were simply a means for Africans to escape their material realities rather than fight to improve them, a true “opium of the masses.”

Nonetheless, it would be imprudent to ignore the power of religious movements to articulate discontent with status quo. Ranger aptly observes, “Few can study these [religious] movements without feeling that even if they were not unequivocally


anticolonial, they constituted a form of politics."\textsuperscript{17} If that was true of religious
movements during the colonial period, it certainly remains true in the post-independence
period. Additionally, in direct challenge to Marxists, historian Cornel West writes:

\begin{quote}
After a century of heralding the cause of liberation of oppressed peoples, Marxists have little understanding and appreciation of the culture of these peoples... Though Marxists have sometimes viewed oppressed peoples as political agents, they have rarely viewed them as cultural agents. Yet without such a view there can be no adequate conception of the capacity of an oppressed people—the capacity to change the world and sustain the change in an emancipatory manner. To take seriously the culture of the oppressed is not to privilege religion, but... to believe that oppressed people have already expressed some of their potential in their actual products, their actual practices.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

In studying the activities, ideologies, and symbols of these religious movements, we are, in fact, also studying their political activities. Granted, sometimes key individual members of these movements have participated in formal political activities, but this does not necessarily discount their movements’ religious nature. Thus, scholars should study religious movements not as substitutes for “proper politics” but for what they are and for their symbolic significance. This is what Karen Field’s study of the Watchtower movement in Southern Africa does. Field aims to arrive at the larger sense of the Watchtower movement, to understand its own ideology on its own terms within its own context, rather than as a more or less distorted and unsatisfactory forerunner of nationalism or of class-consciousness. She writes:

\begin{quote}
How cultural patterns are articulated to systems of political domination is a question as important to pose, as it is elusive to answer systematically. But can we say for certain that in times of upheaval, those who move into action grasp its importance immediately, whatever side they are on? There is no genuine
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Ranger, “African Religious Movements,” 5.

revolution, which is not at the same time cultural. There is no serious political repression, which does not invade the realm of culture.\textsuperscript{19}

In principle, attempting to understand a cultural response to crisis while ignoring the cultural lens is a futile exercise.

Furthermore, Fields demonstrates that the Watchtower movement was a threat to the colonial authorities not because it espoused any sort of modern ideologies, such as nationalism or even class consciousness, but for being exactly what it was: a religious movement. Fields narrates an account where a Catholic priest in Northern Rhodesia in 1918 was strolling one afternoon and encountered an African preaching. This preacher is reported to have said, “Take care, God is great. Pray to God alone.” The priest at once fires into the sky and accuses the man of dangerous politics. He arrests him and has him flogged then goes to the local authorities to report the incident, and they are equally alarmed. But why were these words such a threat? Fields contends that colonial rule itself was an archaic form of polity, critically dependent on religious ideologies. She writes, “Belief comes into view as routine common sense…the supernatural was embedded in mundane social relations…the officials who did not scoff at missionaries’ equating heresy and rebellion made perfect sense.” The colonial authority was given its legitimacy by a certain religious myth that the Watchtower rhetoric seemed to invade. In fact, this awareness was not just on the colonial side. Fields adds, “The (Watchtower adherents) knew how the colonial machinery worked. They knew because it worked on them… The colonial state was a throwback…. exploiting not only the ideological resources of the

Christian churches but also their organizational means.”

Thus, any threat to Mission Christianity was, by extension, a threat to colonialism. From this case study, we see that culture, specifically religion, was the forum in which domination was exercised. It is not surprising that religious movements were an effective means of resisting this form of domination.

As noted above, religious movements did not end with colonialism. Post-colonial Africa is rife with examples of such movements. Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) in 1980s Uganda is a good example of how powerful cultural symbols can be in determining the nature of resistance strategies that a religious movement might employ. Tim Allen’s study of the movement demonstrates the central role of cultural milieus in shaping the nature of these movements. Allen commendably extends beyond the immediate socio-economic and political grievances. His main objective is to “put Alice Lakwena and her Holy Spirit Movement into a local context…(showing) that the movement cannot be understood without reference to longer-term cultural processes, which have a bearing upon the social significance of spirit possession.”

He posits that because the HSM drew from the rich cultural traditions of spirit possession cults/movements in the region that arose during periods of social turmoil, it developed a uniquely localized outlook. Even though “People [told] of the most appalling atrocities, and were obviously terrified of Alice, … they also suggest[ed] that there was a plausibility about her activities not apparent to an outsider, a feeling too that the time

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spent with her was electrifyingly exciting.” 22 This local perspective ensured that the movement was alluring, even though to an outside observer the movement’s activities were “bizarre.” Acholi people understood it, and they, in turn, also felt understood, and thus, in E. Welbourne’s words, “they felt at home.” 23

While the extensive cultural contextualization of this movement is commendable, Allen’s work still portrays religiously based resistance activities as substitutes for modern platforms of recourse. He claims these movements emerge in situations in which structures articulating former orthodoxies have crumbled, and the state has been unable to replace them with effective administrative and legal institutions. 24 In as much as he emphasizes the cultural elements of the HSM, it is evident he still considers these movements as an alternative to effective “proper politics”.

It is not a coincidence that movements like the HSM choose religious rhetoric to frame their political action. It is not as an alternative to “politics” but as a powerful expression of their own identity. Thus, even when overt resistance activities have been quelled or are not viable, individual members of religious protest movements harness power from their rich cultural tradition of resistance, articulated through religious/spiritual imagery. This would explain why even in modern times where science and technology reigns, there seems to be a proliferation of religious movements. James

22 Ibid., 385.


Fernandez, more than three decades ago, predicting the fate of religious movements in the year 2000, wrote:

The disorder of maintenance systems which are not culturally justified and which are not yielding gratifications commensurate with the requirements of their maintenance, (would) lead the rural and urban classes to desultory participation or outright abandonment; they (would) search instead for new local microcosmic orders. All these eventualities would make religious movements attractive.25

Undeniably religiously framed protest has proven to be a viable means of expressing discontent for Africans across time. By no means does this indicate that African cultural expressions are static; on the contrary, this resilience demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of these ideologies.

James Pfieifer, Kenneth Gimbel-Sherr, and Joaquim Augusto concur with this argument in their study of African Independent Churches in Mozambique. These scholars link the proliferation of African Independent Church (AIC) movements in central Mozambique to the intensification of economic disparity in the 1990s produced by privatization, cuts in government services, and arrival of foreign aid promoted by Mozambique's World Bank/International Monetary Fund Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). Through ethnographic research in the Mozambique city of Chimio, Pfieifer, Gimbel-Sherr, and Augusto contend that the growing inequality heightened competition; fear of violence, and conflict between spouses has led to a proliferation of these churches. Pfieifer demonstrates that both men and women have made AICs a sanctuary from their problems, which, according their worldview, originate with evil spirits, witchcraft and sorcery. The AICs invoke the “Holy Spirit" to exorcise malevolent

agents and then provide a community of mutual aid and ongoing protection against spirit threats. Pfeifer, Gimbel-Sherr, and Augusto further posit:

In these approaches, inequality contributes to competitive, insecure, and hostile social environments in which conflicts are revealed and expressed through spiritual afflictions that require spiritual remedies… Pentecostal ideas are so popular now in part because they respond to these occult threats, often recast in Christian imagery as Satanic, by invoking the Holy Spirit’s protective powers.

In a related article, James Pfeiffer suggests that subordinate people, excluded from foreign aid resource flows, alienated from formal political processes, and relying solely on the charisma of local leaders and local mutual aid, have fashioned the most dynamic social movements in contemporary southern Africa. Further implying that these movements appeal to the subaltern because they help them (the poor) negotiate the uncertainties of social and economic life in a period of turbulence and rapid social differentiation. Thus, even though Central Mozambicans were responding to new challenges of SAPS, neoliberalism, and others, the resistance strategies used were based on their interpretation of their cultural heritage.

The rich cultural tradition of religiously based resistance movements is not restricted to the Christian and indigenous realms. These religious movements can also be found in areas with Islamic traditions. The ‘Yan Tatsine movement in West Africa is one such movement. Paul Lubeck’s 1985 article is an excellent study of the movement.


27 Ibid., 690.

Between 1980 and 1985, a series of riots erupted in the cities of Kano, Kaduna, Bulumi-Ketu, Jimeta, and Gombe in Nigeria. In each of these riots, members of the Islamic group ‘Yan Tatsine confronted those outside the sect and security forces, resulting in thousands of deaths and boundless property destruction. These insurrections supposedly erupted when the authorities attempted to arrest the movement’s leader, Alhaji Mohammed Marwa Maitatsine.

Lubeck does an excellent job of showing the intersection between “the ideology of the movement with the social and material relations that gave rise to it.” Focusing on the impoverished floating Koranic students known as the Gardawa, who formed the bulk of the movements’ followers, he examines their networks, which spanned both rural and urban areas. Lubeck suggests that to understand why this venerable Muslim social category should serve as a fertile recruiting ground for an anti-materialist, insurrectionist, and millenarian movement, one must analyze the changing nature of this peripatetic tradition during three distinct phases: the nineteenth century under the Sokoto caliphate; the colonial-mercantile capitalist period (1900-1966); and the contemporary ‘petroleum boom’ period.29

Nonetheless, while brilliantly demonstrating how a pre-capitalist institution, with a pre-capitalist function and supported by essentially pre-capitalist communities, is modified by and, in turn, reacts to capitalist development during the contemporary period, his analysis fails to discuss the place of religious ideology itself. It would have been useful to understand how these changes impacted the movement’s ideology (as this

was a religious/cultural institution) and how it transformed within the specific cultural environment it emerged from.\textsuperscript{30} Lubeck, explaining why he chooses to focus on the Gardawa, concedes that the presence of acute socio-economic crisis does not necessarily lead to “an anti-institutional social movement” like the ‘Yan Tatsine. Thus, he adds, it is important to examine the historical backgrounds of the institution of Gardawa, which is, incidentally, a religious institution. I contend that while the Gardawa institution was important in its socio-economic provisions, its significance to the ‘Yan Tatsine was greater because it provided the religious/ideological framework within which Marwa and his followers could operate. This is evident in the manner that the ‘Yan Tatsine chose to express their discontent.

Lubeck briefly discusses the Mahdist/millenarian tradition but states that since ‘Yan Tatsine prayed three rather than five times, and towards the north rather than Mecca, the use of tattoos, juju drug portions, and invisible ‘magic sand’ to protect them from police bullets suggests that they were a syncretistic rather than orthodox Mahdist movement. In effect, he seems to dismiss the religious impact on their resistance strategies. Yet, the fact that members chose to express themselves through these means, demonstrates that religious ideology developed within their specific cultural worldview was central to their movement. I argue that it is impossible to understand the strategies that religiously based protest movements employ as they engage with the larger society without understanding their specific cultural backgrounds. This becomes evident in a close examination of the Mungiki movement. This movement becomes a site for the

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 372.
negotiation of conflicting religious ideas and cultural symbols that have transformed across time.

**Scholarship on the Mungiki**

The challenge of defining the place of religious ideology within protest movements is evident in the case of the *Mungiki* movement, the subject of this study. Due to the recent participation of members of the *Mungiki* movement in formal political activities, some scholars have opted to relegate the religious element to the background. This dissertation contends that to dismiss the religious component of the *Mungiki* is to ignore a key building block in understanding the movements’ activities, and the invisible cultural continuities and discontinuities within the larger Kikuyu society.

Laudably, the first study on the *Mungiki* focused on its religious nature. Grace Wamue’s study emphasizes the cultural background of the movement, highlighting the key beliefs and practices of the *Mungiki* as they relate to Kikuyu indigenous practices. This scholar begins by positing that the origins of this movement lie with the displaced victims of land clashes in the 1980s. The following paragraph perhaps captures the gist of her entire study. Wamue, relying heavily on J.S Mbiti’s writings on African religion, writes:

> African religion is a reality; being the strongest element in the traditional background, it exerts probably the strongest influence upon the thinking and way of life of the people concerned... alienation form their religious ways of life leaves them in a vacuum devoid of a solid religious foundations. They are torn between the life of their forefathers, which, whatever else might be said about it,

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has historical roots and firm traditions, and the life of the present technological age, which as yet, for many Africans has no concrete form or depth…Where the individual is, there is his religion, for he is a religious being…That understanding makes African appear to be so religious: religion is in the whole system of being, a belief the *Mungiki* members seem to embrace.\(^\text{32}\)

She further claims that unless “foreign” religions such as Christianity and Islam occupy the whole person, most converts to these religions continue to revert to their old beliefs and practices for “perhaps six days a week, and certainly at times of emergency and crisis.” In not so many words, Wamue sees the *Mungiki* as a poster-child for the strength of African “traditional” religions. She argues that the strength of these indigenous religions lies in the fact that they are anchored on everyday life, that is, on culture. While I concur with Wamue’s argument that the permeation of spiritual ideals in everyday life definitely gave strength to indigenous religions, I hesitate to wholly embrace the underlying “modern” versus “traditional” dichotomy. As we saw above, the Kikuyu embraced Christianity in multiple ways and adapted it to fit their cosmology. The Kikuyu, by the late 1920s, Christians or not, were known to use Biblical rhetoric to define who they were.\(^\text{33}\) Thus, it becomes clear that rather than being in an antagonistic relationship with Christianity and other “foreign” religions, Kikuyu cosmology was inclusive, dynamic, and flexible. It therefore becomes imperative to study the *Mungiki* not as a retrogressive nativist movement, but rather as a reflection of the changing nature of cultural symbols.


Another significant work on the Mungiki is Margate Gecaga’s, which does an excellent job of placing the movement within its proper historical context. Nonetheless, while acknowledging the cultural background of the movement, Gecaga chooses to focus instead on the political dimension of the group. She views the Mungiki as a representative case of “religious movements [involvement] in the political process of democratization.” Gecaga views the Mungiki movement as part of a larger religious phenomenon that continues to demand inclusion in the democratization processes in Kenya. She prefaces her study with an insightful discussion defining what constitutes religious and political movements. Citing Audrey Wiper, she states that a religious movement “exemplifies a collective mobilization with the objective of redefining humanity’s relations to questions of ultimate concern, the purpose of life, death and people’s religions to the cosmos and to each other,” while a political movement exemplifies collective mobilization with the objective of maintaining, restoring, modifying, or changing the institutional structure of power in society. She uses the phrase “religio-political,” which she contends is appropriate because it contains both religious and political components.

These definitions raise questions as to what exactly constitutes political action. Is it possible to truly delineate African religious movements from their political nature, making it necessary to add the “political” label in their descriptions? In a review of “The New Religions of Africa,” Benetta Jules-Rosette notes that in African societies, “the political domain has traditionally been defined and reinforced by the sacred symbols and

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beliefs that are fundamental to the communities involved.” Hence, the transformation or innovation of sacred symbols can have profound significance. How? Jules-Rosette writes:

A challenge in the existing social order is implicit in many African religious movements…In this regard, the meanings and uses of new religious movements for their own group members become central issues for study. One must ask how these group members envision the sacred and secular and what symbolic challenge they perceive themselves in making.35

Subsequently, a religious movement is inherently political in its sacred symbols, in that it influences and structures secular actions of its adherents. Indeed, invoking James Scott’s infrapolitics concept, members of a religious movement find within it “means of altering their situations and even reversing their status in both symbolic and social terms.”36 Yet this does not necessarily mean direct engagement with institutional structures of power, as implied by Gecaga’s definition of a political movement. Many time their resistance and, by extension, political activities are expressed in their quotidian existence.

Furthermore, citing renowned sociologist Emile Durkheim, Gecaga emphasizes the functionalist nature of religion, stating that it provides powerful emotional symbols of group identity that bind people together in the midst of great opposition. Gecaga contends that these movements emerge especially during times of crisis, providing coping mechanisms. She then gives examples of religious movements in Africa from the colonial to the post-independent periods that have emerged in times of crisis. Gecaga uses Dini Ya Msambwa, Mumbo Cult, and the Karing’a religious movements in colonial Kenya to


argue her case. She attributes their emergence two factors: “The need to resist cultural forms of neo-colonialism by rallying followers’ traditional values to challenge the orthodoxy behind the mainstream churches as well as the injustices of the state; and economic deprivation or exploitation, most importantly, the loss of land.”37 Thus, she portrays these movements as being direct responses to crisis that have arisen during the colonial and post-independence period. Terrence Ranger warns of this when he writes, “In the pre-colonial period of flexible custom, it has been assumed that religious movements did not arise. Hence nearly all religious movements, whether witchcraft eradication movements or millenarian sects, have been treated as new and as explicable in terms of the special pressures and transformations of colonialism.”

Focusing on the functionalist aspect of these religious movements with little attention to the religious ideology behind the movements really raises more questions than it answers. For instance, Gecaga cites the landlessness and the economic deprivations of members of the Mungiki as the main reason for its emergence,38 but many other groups in Kenya were experiencing the same economic hardships. Why is it that similar movements did not sprout up through the country? Does the intensity of hardship determine where such movements emerge? What about the spiritual aspect of the movements? What is the place of religious rhetoric in determining the nature of the movement’s activities? Additionally, how do the members of the group reconcile their ideology and daily practices?


38 Ibid., 58-89.
The last part of Gecaga’s article touches briefly on Mungiki ideology. She mentions that the Mungiki sought the renaissance of the Kikuyu culture, and calls it nativist and rejecting Western customs. She adds that they advocated the return to traditional beliefs and practices. She further mentions that the Mungiki turned to the past for inspiration and attempted some syncretism in approaching it, stressing the lost glory and dignity of the Agikuyu. Furthermore, because it seeks to reestablish the lost “Kirinyaga Kingdom,” Gecaga terms the Mungiki a millenarian movement. Yet these labels are not enough in facilitating our understanding of the nature of these movements.

As Benneta Jules-Rosette notes:

Categories such as “nativistic,” “messianic,” and “modernizing” presuppose a limited range of psychological motivations among…[movement] members without examining their total social and cultural environments, or their subjective reasons for acting as they do. Although economic factors and cultures of oppression certainly increase the appeal of African prophets and messiahs, they do not account for the wide variations among the movements, the long-term survival of many of the groups, and the changes that they have experienced during the post-colonial era.

Consequently, to effectively understand these movements while avoiding the pitfall of essentializing them on the basis of their actions, we need to recognize the dynamic platform upon which these movements are set. This dynamism of both the cultural symbols and the environment as determined by history has allowed for their continuous relevance to those who draw upon them. Jules-Rosette recognizes this fact when she adds:

Africa's new Churches [and movements] have faced… problems in a variety of ways, ranging from the retreatist nativism found in Linton and Lanternari’s descriptions of nascent pre-independence religious movements, to the sophisticated ecumenical efforts of emerging African denominations toward integration with other world religions. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the
options taken by Africa’s prophetic movements and churches with regard to their histories and future goals.\textsuperscript{39}

Therefore, there is a need to reexamine these religious movements not just as a product of the immediate socio-economic contexts that they exist in, but also as a reflection of underlying tensions that result from cultural transformations stemming from changes in socio-economic structures.

Conversely, there are other studies of the \textit{Mungiki} that have chosen to minimize the role of religious ideology in the movement’s activities citing the leadership’s involvement in formal politics. David Anderson and Peter Kagwanja’s works fall under this category. Anderson contends that while the movement might have been religious while it was still confined to the rural areas, its nature changed as soon as it stepped into the urban milieu. He further contends that \textit{Mungiki}’s departure from Ngonya Wa Gakonya’s \textit{He Ma ya Ngai} movement in the 1990s marked the transition of the movement from a religious to an urban vigilante group.\textsuperscript{40} Using media reports on the alleged activities of \textit{Mungiki}, and statements by the movement’s national coordinator Ndura Waruinge, Anderson contends that by the year 2000, the movement had lost its religious nature.\textsuperscript{41}

Anderson’s study is a significant contribution to the understanding of vigilante movements in the urban areas in Africa. Nonetheless, while Anderson criticizes Wamue’s study for simplifying a complex movement, he unwittingly does the same by not

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 554.
considering the role of religious ideology in shaping the movement’s activities. This is because, unlike other vigilante movements he cites, Mungiki members actually espouse specific religio-cultural ideology, which significantly impacts their actions.\textsuperscript{42} Considering their activities in the light of their professed ideology might have made Anderson’s argument more nuanced argument. Additionally, by asserting that the movement’s transformation into an urban vigilante group was as a result of cooption by the ruling elite, Anderson denies the regular members any agency in the matter. This analysis might have been caused by Anderson’s significant reliance on media and other published reports on the movement at the expense of any personal interviews with members of the movement.

Peter Kagwanja’s study of the movement commendably incorporates cultural ideology in its interpretation of Mungiki’s activities. While he portrays the movement as a larger trend of “informal repression” of opposition by African states, Kagwanja recognizes the central role that cultural heritage has had in the shaping of Mungiki’s activities. Kagwanja asserts that the most significant and enduring Kikuyu cultural legacy on the Mungiki has been the tradition of “resistance and revolutionary change” which, he argues shaped the Mau Mau rebellion and now the Mungiki.\textsuperscript{43} He further affirms that it was this cultural legacy that the political elite in the then ruling political party KANU (Kenya African National Union) exploited as they employed generational discourse in recruiting the Mungiki into their fold. Kagwanja attributes the failure to effectively

\textsuperscript{42} This is based on my personal interviews with members of the Mungiki.

\textsuperscript{43} Kagwanja, “Power to Uhuru,” 60, 61.
mobilize this ideology resulted in intra-KANU conflicts, defections and ultimately, electoral defeat and for the *Mungiki*, a degeneration into a criminal gang.44

Without a doubt, Kagwanja’s analysis is helpful in understanding why some members of the *Mungiki* have participated in formal politics. Nevertheless, since participation of *Mungiki* in the public political arena was quite limited to its leadership, Kagwanja’s theory does not sufficiently explain everyday activities of the *Mungiki*’s rank and file. In anticipation of this critique, Kagwanja cites Cruise O’Brien who suggests that Africa’s youth are too poorly equipped to withstand manipulative attempts of the older and wealthier generations. Nonetheless, were these youths simply motivated by material gains; it is quite unlikely that *Mungiki* membership would have withstood an all-out governmental crackdown.45 In his concluding remarks, Kagwanja repeats a query that historian Atieono-Odhiambo raised, “why has *Mungiki* leadership not lost the people?” This pertinent question, whose answer, I argue lies in the realms of religious ideology, is the main focus of the present dissertation.

This study, relying on extensive interviews with the rank and file and leadership of the *Mungiki*, attempts to place cultural and religious framework back at the center of understanding this movement’s activities. This is not to minimize the “materialist, instrumentalist and ethnocentric character,”46 of the movement, but rather to provide an umbrella under which to understand all of these other facets of the movement. I argue

44 Ibid., 52.


that a fragmented religious identity is the most enduring cultural legacy on the Kikuyu’s formal and informal politics. I demonstrate this by focusing on the cultural changes that have accompanied the changing socio-economic structure of the Kikuyu society since its encounter with colonial forces and how this has affected resistance actions in times of crises. Understanding these processes also sheds light on the cultural undercurrents within the Kikuyu society. These cultural processes continue unnoticed until the right combination of factors, such as cultural, economic, or political upheaval; and a capable leader, able to manipulate these cultural symbols to mobilize, emerges. For example, in the case of the Mungiki, I argue that it reveals underlying tensions within the Kikuyu society that tend to emerge in times of crisis. This might explain why some societies experience surges in religiously based protest movements during times of crisis while others undergoing similar socio-economic challenges do not.

Methodology and organization of the Study

The dissertation is divided chronologically. While I realize that historical events are not necessarily linear, a chronological approach makes it easier to trace these cultural symbols across time. I devote the first two chapters to discussing the historical and cultural backgrounds of the Kikuyu, with a specific focus on the social structures and the underlying cultural symbols, and how these transformed upon the encounter with colonialism. This is especially significant because, a key argument in my dissertation is that we can only understand collective responses to the vagaries of the post-colonial world through a study of their cultural and historical backgrounds. Having established the necessary framework within which to analyze these cultural symbols, the latter part of the dissertation focuses on the Mungiki movement itself.
Chapter one is the introduction in which I provide the theoretical framework for the present study. In this section, I maintain that reactions to post-colonial socio-economic challenges can be better understood by exploring how Africans have used their specific cultural symbols, specifically religious concepts, to cope with the transformations within their societies as a result of their encounter with colonialism and globalization. I also examine literature that discusses the intersection between religious movements and resistance. I further assert that religious movements in post-colonial Africa are potent platforms of responses to socio-economic strain, not for their hidden political rhetoric, but for their ability to manipulate and assign meanings to the relevant cultural and religious symbols, which in turn empower adherents to cope with the said challenges.

Chapter two then focuses on pre-colonial Kikuyu society with special interest in its social, cultural, and political structures, and their accompanying cultural systems. This is especially important if we are to understand how the Kikuyu society transformed under colonialism. In this chapter I examine the socio-cultural structures within which Kikuyu religious identity emerged and transformed, providing a framework within which to analyze the Mungiki movement in post-colonial Kenya. In the reconstruction of the history of pre-colonial Kikuyu society, I relied upon published primary sources containing information on the Kikuyu cultural, political and social organization. This information was collected from the Kikuyu themselves from the late 19th–century to the early 20th–century by various individuals including: anthropological researchers commissioned by the colonial government, missionaries who lived among the Kikuyu for extended periods of times and mission educated Africans such as Jomo Kenyatta.
Additionally, I also utilized Godfrey Muriuki’s seminal work on the Kikuyu that systematically analyzes Kikuyu oral traditions to reconstruct their migration and settlement patterns from the 16th–century to the 19th-century. I also made use of archival sources from the Kenya National Archives, such as correspondences between missionaries and colonial administrators as they discussed various elements of Kikuyu cultural practices that they had encountered. These correspondences were often about initiation rites, both male and female, land tenures, religious practices, social and political organization of the Kikuyu among others topics. The archival documents were not only useful for the information they provided but also especially important in providing an understanding of colonial attitudes toward the Kikuyu and vice versa. As I was unable to personally acquire data on the pre-colonial Kikuyu society from the Kikuyu themselves, the multi-dimension approach I adopted in the collection of my sources for this chapter allowed me to corroborate whatever information I gathered from the archives.

The third chapter focuses on the Kikuyu during the colonial period. It especially emphasizes the impact that conversion to Christianity had on the Kikuyu society, at the turn of the century. In this section, I argue that while the Kikuyu already had a predisposition towards a fragmented identity along generational and geographical lines, conversion to Christianity widened these rifts by amplifying the socio-economic divide. This happened through the emergence of multiple brands of Christianity creating the basis for a fragmented religious identity that would come to characterize the Kikuyu in the colonial and post-colonial period. Using the Arathi movement, I demonstrate how these competing ideologies provided the different segments of Kikuyu society with a brand new way of asserting their power and articulating their grievances. This period
marked the beginning of religiously based rivalries, which became part of Kikuyu identity. These rivalries would impact the Kikuyu’s political responses in tumultuous times. I use the Mau Mau movement of the 1950s to demonstrate this divisive force of religious rivalries. For this chapter, I made extensive use of the Kikuyu Newspaper Muigithania (published between 1928-1945) which facilitated my understanding of how the educated Kikuyu felt about various issues ranging from Christianity to their indigenous customs as it related to their changing world under colonialism. Moreover, I consulted correspondences between various colonial administrators as they discussed the emerging Christian religious sects among the Kikuyu. This was especially important in highlighting the emerging religious divisions among the Kikuyu. I also made extensive use of oral interviews of members of the Arathi movement.47 These interviews provide insight into how a certain segment of disenfranchised Kikuyu viewed mainstream Kikuyu independent churches. These individuals began their Spirit Churches because they felt that Kikuyu Independent Churches were not meeting the needs of the whole community. Instead, they argued that the former were more concerned with wealth and power than in obeying the voice of the Holy Spirit.

The fourth chapter demonstrates the resilience of the divided religious identity and how this continues to shape collective action among the Kikuyu in times of turmoil. The chapter does this through the study of the Mungiki movement that emerged in the late 1980s. This section focuses on Mungiki’s origins, religious traditions and practices as they relate to their Kikuyu cultural heritage. I argue that the movement is an heir of

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47 I am especially grateful to Dr. David Sandgren, who kindly gave me access to the interviews he conducted in 1971 among members of the Arathi, religious movement.
multiple religious traditions, the most significant being the *Arathi* religious traditions. As noted above, these religious traditions were popular among the disenfranchised Kikuyu during the colonial period. As such, this movement is evidence of the enduring legacy of a fragmented Kikuyu identity, shaped and articulated through competing religious ideologies, but solidified by socio-economic inequities.

The fifth chapter then addresses the question of violence associated with the *Mungiki* arguing that this violence is further evidence of deep-seated divisions within the Kikuyu society. The movement has been accused of allegedly perpetrating gruesome acts of violence against innocent people. Although I spent two months with members of *Mungiki* in often very vulnerable situations no harm came to me. Nonetheless, I find it difficult to believe that all these allegations have no basis at all. In this chapter, using the Weberian concept of charisma, I examine these allegations in the light of leadership rivalries within the movement and underlying tensions in the larger Kikuyu society. I contend that understanding the power struggles between the sacred and secular components of *Mungiki* leadership facilitates our understanding of its activities.

In the study of the *Mungiki* movement, this dissertation relies on oral interviews, which I conducted among members of the *Mungiki* movement in 2012, and supplements them with newspaper articles from when the movement was founded to the present. It was especially significant to conduct interviews with members of the *Mungiki* because I felt that the media coverage upon which many scholarly works on the *Mungiki* were based, tended to be one sided. Most reports often included accounts of violent acts allegedly perpetrated by the members of the *Mungiki* without any proof. Moreover these reports often portrayed the movement as an ethno-centric neo-traditionalist whose main
goal was to reassert Kikuyu dominance over other ethnicities in Kenya. Nonetheless, I wondered if that was the case, why most of the alleged violence by the *Mungiki* was upon other Kikuyus. Moreover, I was curious as to why despite the government’s open hostility, individuals were still willing to associate with the movement. Subsequently, my interviews sought to understand what prompted these individuals to join and stay with this movement and the motivation behind their actions as members of the *Mungiki*. Furthermore, as noted above, some scholars have contested the religious nature of the movement, arguing that its interests lay more in the secular arena.\(^{48}\) My interviews were therefore also geared towards determining whether or not the movement was religious in nature. Concerning the origin of the movement, I used member narrations but supplemented them with newspaper articles about the rise of this movement. Through these interviews I was able to understand the socio-economic backgrounds of the movement’s members and leadership.

Because of its controversial and often violent relationship with the Kenyan administration, I had to use caution as I recruited participants for my research. I had several advantages in conducting this fieldwork: First, as a former journalist, I was able to get contacts within the high ranks of the *Mungiki* relatively quickly. These contacts, in turn, arranged for meetings with the regular members. Secondly, being a Kikuyu, and therefore not needing an interpreter, and a woman made it easier for them to trust me. Although they were wary at first, I was able to prove to them that I did not work for the government and that my interviews were solely for research purposes. They examined my sunglasses and pens for hidden cameras but were willing to let me record the

\(^{48}\) Anderson, “vigilantes, violence and the politics,” 534.
interviews. For two months, in the afternoons mostly, I met with different members of the movement some times twice if I felt an individual had useful information that could not be gathered in one sitting. We met at restaurants in the heart of downtown Nairobi, in suburbs and even open-air markets. I was also able to visit Ol-ng’arua, the birthplace of the movement, and to spend the weekend among members of this movement observing and interacting with them. Nonetheless, I made it a point not to pay for the information, and it was only after the interview that I would give a small monetary gift to compensate for their transportation to interview points or pay for their meals if we met at a restaurant. Usually, they chose the place of meetings and I would be informed of it only ten minutes before the scheduled time. My interviews were mainly about the individuals’ pasts, encounter with the movement, their perception of the movements’ ideology and their response to allegations of brute violence allegedly perpetrated by them on the innocent.

I recognize that these sources are by no means exhaustive or infallible. To illustrate, European officials that authored most of the archival sources I used, were predominantly subjective, having stakes in what was going on, or simply being culturally and racially biased. Yet, these documents remain useful in determining colonial attitudes towards the Kikuyu, and specific points of contention within the administration itself. Additionally, since I did not conduct the interviews with the Arathi I have had to contend with Sandgren’s own research objectives and biases as I utilized his interviews. For the Mungiki, the biggest challenge was finding unbiased sources. On the one hand the media coverage on the Mungiki often emphasized the movement’s violence without necessarily giving convincing evidence of such. On the other hand, statements from the Mungiki sought to absolve them of any responsibility in the allegations and instead to portray
themselves as noble martyrs. Nonetheless, I found both sources useful in balancing and complementing one another. Another weakness in these sources is their gender bias.

From the discussion of pre-colonial Kikuyu society to the Mungiki movement, I was unable to adequately capture women’s position. This mainly had to do with the nature of sources I used. The masculine nature of the colonial administration and religious movements examined, women’s experiences were seldom captured. To address this imbalance in the study I conducted among the Mungiki, I would have had to spend more time and resources than I had at my disposal. It would have certainly been enlightening to hear the opinions of the women, most of who were members of the movement through marriage.
Chapter 2: Pre-colonial Kikuyu Society and Culture

This chapter examines the Kikuyu society from their original migration in the mid 17th-century to their settlement and initial encounters with Europeans in the late 19th-century. Additionally, I examine how their spiritual belief systems shaped the social and cultural order. In harmony with Comaroff’s observations, these observable features were “the product of the interplay of structural form and everyday practices…which were conditioned by legacy of past events, and by a range of diverse historical circumstances.”49 Indeed, the Kikuyu sociocultural order, mediated by a coherent pattern of symbols and value, carries within it footprints of historical events. These deeply engrained representations continued to shape the identity of the Kikuyu even as they encountered different challenges. As will be discussed later, this pattern was evident during the colonial period and continues to be true in post-independent Kenya.

Comaroff aptly captures the challenges of studying the sociocultural structure of a people in the hope of finding reproducible and thus identifiable social systems “without unduly reducing (their) complexities.”50 The challenge, she argues, arises from the fact that sociocultural structure and lived experience exist in a contradictory relationship.

This is because of the constantly shifting material circumstances, which are capable of not only reproducing the structural order but also of changing it, “either through

50 Ibid., 45.
cumulative shifts or by means of consciously motivated actions.”\textsuperscript{51} Even with these contradictions, through a systematic study of a particular group’s cultural systems across time, it is still possible to glean identifiable cultural signs. Consequently, it makes sense to begin with a study the Kikuyu pre-colonial history, which includes migration and settlements, political and economic organization, and sociocultural system.

This chapter opens with a brief history of the Kikuyu, including their patterns of migration, to their present home at the foothills of Mt. Kenya from the mid 17\textsuperscript{th}-century to the late 19\textsuperscript{th}-century. These patterns of migration and settlements provided the basis for their religious beliefs and customs.\textsuperscript{52} The chapter then examines pre-colonial Kikuyu social, economic, and political structures, which, like in many African societies, cannot be dissociated from the spiritual realm. The section concludes with a description of the Kikuyu’s encounter with European administrative companies and traders at the conclusion of the 19\textsuperscript{th}-century. It is important to note that the early encounters between the British and the Kikuyu were quite significant in shaping European-Kikuyu relations and would set the tone for their interactions for rest of the colonial period.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 44.

\textsuperscript{52} Godfrey Muriuki, \textit{A History of the Kikuyu 1500-1900} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 112. This is the first and the only systematic analysis of Kikuyu oral traditions in an attempt to recreate the pre-colonial history of the Kikuyu people.
The Migration and Settlement of the Kikuyu

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Kikuyu occupied the area surrounding the foothills of Mt. Kenya: to the north, Nyeri, also known as Gaki; to the South, Kiambu or Kabete; and in the middle, Murang’a or Metumi. This portion of land had not always been their homeland. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, the proto-Kikuyu began their migration from Tigania, Igembe, Tharaka, Cuka, Embu, and Mbeere regions in the eastern part of Kenya, moving north and south along the spine of the Aberdere Ranges. Godfrey Muriuki suggests that by the mid-17th century, the proto-Kikuyu, who up to that point had migrated as a loose and diverse group made up of hunters, or pastoralists, consolidated into a distinctive group with distinctive social and political structures. This consolidation that happened when they reached the forested highlands, allowed them to develop a sedentary agricultural lifestyle. To successfully unite such a diverse group of people, it was necessary to create cultural symbols that would provide a basis of unity for the Kikuyu people. One such symbol is the Kikuyu myth of origin. Even though there are two main versions, the following is the most popular:

*Mogai* (divider of the universe) made Gikuyu, the father of the Kikuyu and allotted the choicest portion of land to him. At the same time, he made a big mountain, which he named Kirinyaga (Mount Kenya) as a sign to Gikuyu. This mountain would become *Mogai*’s resting point whenever he came to make an inspection of his earthly belongings. *Mogai* further instructed Gikuyu to go down and make his homestead in a place called *Mokorwe wa Gathanga*, telling him that whenever he was in need, all he had to do was make a sacrificial.

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54 Ibid., 62, 63.
offering and raise his hands towards the Mountain and he would be heard. When Gikuyu arrived at *Mokorwe wa Gathanga*, he found that Mogai had provided him with a beautiful wife called Mumbi (creator). Although they were quite happy with the nine daughters they had been blessed with, Gikuyu wanted a male heir. He remembered Mogai’s instructions and he called upon him for help. Mogai instructed him to make a sacrifice under the *Mukuyu* tree (fig) near his homestead and to return the next day. Upon returning, he found nine young men under the tree. He took them home and had them marry his daughters. These unions brought forth the Kikuyu ethnic group, with the nine principal clans being eponymous of the nine daughters. These nine clans were: *Wacheera, Wanjko, Wairimo, Wamboi, Wanger, Wanjiru, Wangoi, Mwethaga, and Wathera.*

Arguably, the strength of myths of origin does not lie in their historical specificity. Yet they remain quite significant in African societies for a variety of reasons. Okon Uya writes the following about myths of origins and their significance:

A sound knowledge of the past (encoded within myths of origins and other oral traditions) means access to land, right to office and a secured membership of the community. The well being of the community is dependent to a great extent on the posture of the ancestors. This means that, more often than not, if any harm occurs in a society, the way that it is explained is that society itself has not been faithful to its pastness. It has not placated the ancestors very well. It becomes important, therefore that in pouring libations one summons the past, in which a whole train of ancestors are called upon to bless the living community; a prerequisite for positive progress in the living community. Hence, knowledge of the past is a good investment. The past ties the living community into the world of ancestors. The dead, or those who have left this present reality to the other, for they are not really dead, affects what goes on in the present community. In other words, laying a claim to authority becomes a correlation between pastness and sacredness. This is one of the reasons why the past in most African societies is conceived in mythological terms. It becomes mythical only because pastness, long enough, assures, the dimension of sacredness.

Thus, within myths of origins one might find either a community’s justifications of ownership of land or way of life, or simply a source of unity. In the Kikuyu’s case it

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served both purposes. The Kikuyu could claim the beautiful land in which they lived as their own, having been divinely apportioned to them, and also claim a common ancestry. This is evident in the fact that the Kikuyu chose to name the ten principal clans after the mythical daughters of Kikuyu and Mumbi.

Following the emergence of the Kikuyu as a distinct group, subsequent migration and settlements became important to the ensuing system of land tenure. The ridge and valley topography, which is characteristic of Kikuyu land, considerably influenced the nature of original settlements. Similarly, the original settlement patterns affected the interplay of forces within the social and political organizations that eventually evolved. Early pioneers occupied the land ridge by ridge and later invited their kinsmen and other diverse elements into their sphere. Normally, the pioneer and his family moved along the valley bottom in their exploration of the area. When a family found a suitable area, they settled upon the top of the ridge for defense purposes and began to clear the forest for cultivation. However, in areas around Kabete, the process was quite different, as land was acquired by buying it from the Athi, who already possessed it. Gradually, as the mbari expanded numerically, the original land shrank. In five or six generations, the land shortage forced individual family heads to venture into new lands in the frontier to establish new mbaris. Because such exploratory ventures required courage and bravery,

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58 Sandgren, Christianity and the Kikuyu, 9.
the Kikuyu held such *mbari* founders in high regard and came to revere them as ancestral guardians of the community.\textsuperscript{59}

*Mbari* division was the common means of driving the migration throughout the highlands. Upon settling into the newly acquired land, each *mbari* worked as a corporate unit, expanding its area of cultivation and developing in relative isolation to other *mbari*. This isolation led to a feeling of exclusiveness, as each *mbari* came to depend upon its own resources for solving the frontier problems of economic advancement and protection. The steep hills and rapidly moving rivers surrounding each *mbari* location further encouraged this isolation that had become characteristic of the Kikuyu society by the end of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{60}

**Kikuyu Political Organization**

Due to the patterns of migrations and settlement, by the 19\textsuperscript{th} century Kikuyu political structure was uncentralized and patriarchal. The basic unit of the society was the family. The father was the head of the family. Upon his death, his eldest son took over the responsibility. The head of the family was the supreme authority in all-family affairs, although if he were the son, he would have to consult his brothers or other close relatives before executing important matters. For example, he could not sell the family land without first consulting, and getting the consent of, other male members of the *mbari*. From the family, the other key unit was the *mbari* that was under an *mbari* council comprising of all the initiated males who had attained elderhood. The council oversaw all

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\textsuperscript{59} Muriuki, *History of the Kikuyu*, 35.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
the affairs of the *mbari* but had a titular head called a *muramati* (plr. *Aramati*). His primary duty was to regulate the day-to-day affairs of the *mbari* such as mediations in times of quarrels over land, and mainly served as a spokesperson in inter-*mbari* affairs. A *muramati* was usually the eldest son from the senior house line, but sometimes, if there a more capable individual were present in a junior house, he would be elected.\(^61\)

Despite such localized existence among the Kikuyu, each *mbari* owed its allegiance to the wider community, tracing its origin to one of the ten principal Kikuyu clans named in the myth of origin. Moreover, these *mbaris* were bound to each other by the age-set system (*mariika*, sing. *riika*), which provided the means by which to recruit males into groups of “coevals for political interaction and organization.\(^62\)” Muriuki contends that the proto-Kikuyu borrowed this system from the *Gumba* people that they encountered as they migrated. He further suggests that by the mid-seventeenth century, the Kikuyu had adopted and fully integrated the *mariika* system and its accompanying initiation rites into their cultural practices. The initiation involved physical operation, namely circumcision for boys and *irua* or clitoridectomy for girls. An age-set was comprised of a group of young people who had been initiated at the same time, and was named after the most notable event that occurred shortly before or after the initiation.\(^63\) For example, the *Mutung'u* (smallpox) age-set was named after the 1983 smallpox  

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\(^61\) Ibid., 116.  
\(^62\) Ibid.  
epidemic. Following initiation, new male and female initiates became full members of the society with gender-specific duties.

On the one hand, female initiates were divided into junior and senior groups, corresponding to the junior and senior warrior groups with whom they were associated. Junior girls had to pay a fee in order to be admitted into the ranks of the senior girls. The senior girls were responsible for educating the younger groups in matter pertaining to sex, proper behavior between warriors and girls, and other issues about homemaking. There were strict rules of conduct among women, which were enforced by fines and ostracism in severe cases. Since the Kikuyu were mainly patriarchal, women’s activities were limited to domestic affairs, agricultural matters, and the regulation of social life. Yet, as I will discuss later, the role of women in the family and society as a whole was pivotal to the political economy of the Kikuyu.

On the other hand, new male initiates became members of the warrior group whose primary duty was the defense of the territory. These newly initiated youth served under senior warriors until the latter were satisfied that they (junior warriors) were experienced enough to take over effectively. The junior warrior corps was also charged with performing other public functions such as policing the markets and containing disorderly activities during communal festivals and other public gatherings. When necessary, they scoured the country punishing habitual criminals.

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After 82 months of service, junior warriors transitioned into the second stage of warriorhood called *njama ya ita* (war council). This council was responsible for conducting military operations, but had to consult with the elders on wider issues like the timing of a campaign, alliances, among others. Other functions of the war council included the discipline of the warrior group as a whole, the instruction of junior warriors, both in tactics and in the rights and prohibitions pertaining to their sub-set, and general policing.\(^{67}\) Administratively, the whole warrior class had its village, district, and regional leaders, called *athamaki a riika* (leaders of the set), who represented them in matters affecting the society. These leaders were selected at public or general assemblies. They were chosen on the basis of merit, having demonstrated desirable traits such as bravery in war, charisma, and wisdom.

Another integral part of the Kikuyu political structure was elderhood. Those who had served their warrior duties and were married could then be initiated into elder institutions. To be fully admitted into elderhood, senior warriors had to make several payments. A senior warrior had to pay one male goat or sheep to join the first grade of eldership called *kiama kia kamatimo*. The word *matimo* means spear, which denoted that the bearer is an elder in training. The *kamatimo* acted as messengers of the *kiama*, running errands for the senior elders.\(^{68}\) The next stage was *kiama kia mataathi* (the council of peace), which a Kikuyu junior elder entered as soon as his son or daughter was ready for initiation. During initiation into this stage, the man learned of the inner core


\(^{68}\) Ibid., 192, 193.
traditions and customs of the society. After the ceremony, the candidate was then introduced to the etiquette of the peace council, which could not be revealed to non-members. This council was part of the judicial system among the Kikuyu arbitrating over disputes within the society.  

The final and the most honored status in a man’s life was the *kiama kia maturanguru* (the religious and sacrificial council), which a Kikuyu man entered once all his children were initiated and all his wives were past the childbearing age. Apart from his staff, he wore brass rings in his ears but he only gained the sacrificial privileges when he paid an ewe, which was then slaughtered by the elders of the sacrificial council. The elders ate half the animal, and the other half was burnt in the sacrificial fire. The main purpose of this ceremony is to dedicate the life of the elder to *Ngai* (God) and to the welfare of the community. As we will see later, these elders were at the core of religious functions within the community. Even more significantly, these groups of elders formed the powerful inner council, *ndundu ya kiama*, that regulated the general affairs of the Kikuyu society at large. This council also selected a *muthamaki* (sing.) as their spokesman.

Nonetheless, despite the egalitarian appearance of the Kikuyu society, there is evidence that those who became *athamaki* were often already influential and wealthy men. Writing about the qualities of such men before they were elected, Middleton and Kershaw write:

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Councils would seek to select a man who was known for his wisdom, a *muthamaki* (judge, spokesman) who could advice through his experience and command respect. These *athamaki* (plural) might in certain cases attain renown far beyond their local councils and be sought after as arbiters in disputes within the *rugongo* (ridge) and even wider. If a *muthamaki* were moreover a senior member of a *mbari* with unused land at his disposal, then tenants would seek to come and live with him. He might thus be a very influential person, and also a wealthy one.\(^71\)

The fact that British administrators falsely recognized some individuals as “chiefs” where none existed is testament to this fact.\(^72\) The emergence of powerful individuals in a seemingly egalitarian society can be closely linked to the Kikuyu pre-colonial economy.

**Pre-colonial Economy of the Kikuyu**

19\(^{\text{th}}\)-century Kikuyu had a mixed economy in which women and girls performed the bulk of the horticultural and food processing activities. The men were responsible for tending animals, such as goats and sheep and a limited number of cattle. Men were also responsible for clearing and breaking new lands. The Kikuyu considered sweet potatoes, sugar cane, and bananas as male crops, but women were responsible for the day-to-day care of these crops. Women also panted and took care of the staple crops such as maize, beans, and millet. Additionally, all domestic housework was women’s responsibility.\(^73\)

The Kikuyu also participated in trading activities among themselves and with their neighbors like the Masai and the Akamba. They exchanged livestock and livestock

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products, iron tools, pottery wares, bows and arrows, snuffboxes, and medicines, among other goods.\textsuperscript{74}

The Kikuyu measured wealth in terms of livestock, land, and people. Livestock was especially useful in increasing the number of people under one family group and, hence, the amount of people that owed allegiance to that family. The more a family group had, the easier it was to mobilize more resources. On this point, Carolyn Clark writes:

Through the exchange of bridewealth-livestock, marriages were legitimated, and women whose children increased the size of the group were incorporated into the family. These women put more land under cultivation, and enabled the distribution of more foodstuffs. The mobilization of wealth in the form of land, livestock, and people is a single, though complex, process, which collapses the division between subsistence and political economy.\textsuperscript{75}

Moreover, the head of a large mbari used land to recruit followers, males that he could call upon to support his voice in the inner council. Such followers gave the head of the mbari or landowners livestock for ritual occasions and a portion of each harvest. This was then used for trade, for hospitality as they forged alliances, or to feed workers that were recruited to clear new lands. All of these activities served to increase the prestige of the mbari head.\textsuperscript{76}

Women were quite important in all of these transactions in two ways: as the primary subsistence producers and as long distance traders. As regards subsistence production, Felicia Ekejiuba uses the term hearth-hold, to challenge the household as the basic unit of consumption. She defines the hearth-hold as a “unit centered around the

\textsuperscript{74} Cagnolo, \textit{The Agikuyu}, 44; Kenyatta, \textit{Facing Mount Kenya}, 67.


\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
stove found in the woman’s hut. The hearth was demographically made up of a woman and all her dependents, whose food security she is either fully or partially responsible for. The dependents could include the woman’s children, her co-resident relatives who, in one way or another, assist her in caring, and nurturing members of her hearth-hold, who share the food cooked on her stove. Thus, the hearth-hold, rather than household, was the primarily a unit of consumption and production and, by extension, a key factor in the political organization. This was especially evident among the Kikuyu. Heads of *mbaris* depended on women within their families to provide food not just for the family but also for the non-relatives who attached themselves to the family. Louis Leakey describes what happened as follows:

> Having got thus far with the work, a man would arrange for a big working party for a single day, and make his wives cook a plentiful supply of food for them to eat while they worked, as well as beer to be drunk in the evening when the work was over. Twenty or thirty men would form such a working party and all their womenfolk would come too.

The more the food, the likelier that *ahoi* (tenants-at-will) would attach themselves to that particular family group. This further enhanced a man’s position as leader by virtue of his position in the kinship network and age-grade system.

Moreover, women participated in long-distance trading activities that increased the number of livestock belonging to the family group. Louis Leakey elaborately describes Kikuyu women’s participation in long-distance trading activities. He notes that

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these women often organized into caravans of up to a hundred women and frequently undertook long expeditions into Ukambani and Masailand. They sold dried banana flour, maize, sorghum, beans, tobacco, honey, and pottery commodities, in exchange for brass and copper wires, goats, and sheep.\textsuperscript{79}

Nonetheless, the Kikuyu society was by no means free of economic inequities. For instance, despite their pivotal role in the family’s economic status, women’s positions still remained subordinate to that of the males in the community. They rarely had full control over their own resources, as they had to consult with their husbands or male relatives before utilizing them.\textsuperscript{80} Additionally, those who became \textit{ahoi} were usually young men without any property. It is plausible that there arose a struggle for resources among the \textit{ahoi} attached to one family group and also between the \textit{ahoi} and the blood relatives of the \textit{mbari} head.\textsuperscript{81}

**Kikuyu Religious Beliefs and Rituals**

This section focuses on how the Kikuyu interpreted and manifested their spiritual belief system in their day-to-day lives. I begin by analyzing the Kikuyu religious/spiritual system and the accompanying symbols and how they impacted different facets of the Kikuyu way of life. As in many African societies, the Kikuyu did not separate the


physical from the spiritual realm. Reverence for ancestors permeated every aspect of Kikuyu life. As Muriuki puts it:

The majority of traditional African societies believed in the continuity of life, in life after death and a community of interest between the living and the dead and the generations yet unborn. This fundamental and three-dimensional concept gave these communities not only coherence, but also a deep sense of history and tradition. This concept deeply influenced their day quotidian religious, social and political life and hence the widespread view that each community was founded by an ancestor, or a group of ancestors, from whom the ethnic group derived its possessions and status.82

The Kikuyu pre-colonial religious system can be divided into two areas. The first is the belief in Ngai, the supreme deity of the Kikuyu. The Kikuyu believed that Ngai dwelt in the sky but Mount Kirinyaga (Mount Kenya) signified his power. This is why the Kikuyu prayed with their hands raised towards the mountain. Ngai’s presence was also seen in inanimate things such as the sun moon and even lightening. The Kikuyu reverence for Ngai was inculcated in children from a young age. For instance, whenever there was lightning, it was taboo to look up to the sky. The Kikuyu treated God with worshipful reverence in an act called Gothaithaya Ngai, which means to beseech Ngai, or worship. This is quite different from the term used for the interactions with ancestors, which is Goitangera Ngoma Njohi, meaning to pour libations, indicating a communing with ancestors. Kenyatta argues that the Kikuyu did not worship ancestors. Nonetheless, they believed that Ngai was not one to be pestered with petty individual issues and they therefore rarely prayed to God individually. In fact, they had a saying “Ngai eikaraga matuine, na nderoranagia na wera wa maondo omwe mwanja, eroranagia na mawera ma ando ootope, kana ando a nyomba emwe. Ngai ndigiagiagwo (God lives in the

82 Muriuki, History of the Kikuyu, 134.
Heavens and does not bother with the work or affairs of one man alone. He looks after the affairs of all people or a homestead group. There is no one man's religion or sacrifice).\textsuperscript{83} It was only in times of communal crisis that the Kikuyu sought Ngai’s help. During such times, the \textit{athamaki}, who were also religious specialists, offered sacrifices and prayers to Ngai on behalf of the community. These prayers were often in a call-and-response form.\textsuperscript{84} Here is an example of such a prayer:

\begin{quote}
ugai kiama kiroiguana (Say ye, the elders may have wisdom and speak with one voice.) Thaithayai Ngai thaaai (Praise ye Ngai. Peace be with us.)

Ugai borori uroagirira, na ando maroingeha (Say ye that the country may have tranquility and the people may continue to increase.)

Thaathayai Ngai thaaai (Praise ye Ngai. Peace be with us.)

Ugai ando na Mahio marogia uhoru (Say ye that the people and the flocks and the herds may prosper and be free from illness.)

Thaithayai Ngai thaaai (Praise ye Ngai. Peace be with us.)

Ugai megonda irogia iro, na ithaka irokiria konora (Say ye the fields may bear much fruit and the land may continue to be fertile.)

Thaithayai Ngai thaaai. (Praise ye Ngai. Peace be with us.)\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}

The second component of the Kikuyu religious system is the belief in the ancestors (\textit{ngoma}). The Kikuyu relied on ancestral spirits for guidance on daily matters. Kenyatta states that these ancestors were divided into three categories:

\begin{quote}
There are three main groups in the spirit world. The spirits of the father or mother, which communicated directly with the living children and which can advise or reproach the children in the same way as they did during their lifetime. 2. Clan
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{83} Kenyatta, “Ancestor-Worship and Sacrificial Practices,” \textit{Africa} 10, no. 3 (July 1937): 310.

\textsuperscript{84} Sandgren, \textit{Kikuyu and Christianity}, 11.

\textsuperscript{85} Kenyatta, \textit{Facing Mount Kenya}, 229, 230.
spirits, which have an interest in the welfare and prosperity of the clan. They act collectively in accordance with the living clan, administering justice according to the behavior of the clan, or any of its members. 3. Age-group spirits. These are concerned with the activities of their particular age group, which unifies the tribe. The three groups of spirits composed of young and old men, women and children, in their respective age groups are joined in a wider group. This grouping corresponds to a tribal organization of the spirit world. It directs its activities to the more important matters of the tribe; it is not interested in individuals. 86

Mbiti argues that in many African societies, the ancestors are “the living dead” who were to be consulted in all aspects of communal life. 87 Based on this concept, death was not a hindrance to the relationship between the living and the dead. The Kikuyu thus ensured that they placated their ancestors in all matters. An examination of the rituals accompanying birth and initiation demonstrates this.

**Birth**

Birth was an important part of the Kikuyu’s lives, as it signified the continuity of the cycle of life. In case there was a problem during delivery, a sacrifice was made involving the killing of a goat. Its blood was sprinkled on the ground to pacify the spirit that was believed to be causing problem. Upon the successful birth of the child, the father cut five sugar canes in case of a son and four for a daughter. The scraps of the crushed canes were laid carefully beside the entrance to the hut. If a boy had been born, the scraps were placed on the right, and if it was a girl, the scraps were then placed on the left side of the entrance. The mother and child were then secluded four days for a girl and five days for a boy. 88 After the seclusion period was over, the mother’s head was shaven and

the father slaughtered a goat. All who took part in the feast could not eat meat elsewhere for four days, and neither were they to go anywhere where a corpse was lying. These procedures had to be duly observed to keep the ancestors happy for the good of the family and the whole community. On the significance of these rites and observances, Mbiti writes:

Seclusion…symbolizes the concept of death and resurrection: death to one state of life, and resurrection to a fuller state of life…the hair also has the symbolic connection between the mother and child, so that shaving it indicates that the child now belongs not only to her but to the entire body of relative, neighbors and other members of the society… a sheep is sacrificed [to bring] not only God into the picture but also the living-dead since these also participate in the occasion of rejoicing: it is ‘their’ child as much as it is the child of the human family. 89

Initiation

While birth was a joyous event among the Kikuyu, initiation was much more significant because it signified one’s becoming a full member of the community and was an integral part of the age-set system (mariika). Following initiation, one became an adult and could participate in the important events of the community. Moreover, initiation among the Kikuyu ensured unity across the different mbaris and provided the age-set arrangement upon which the administrative structure was built. Initiation was not only unifying but was also used to inculcate the basic cultural and religious traditions in the Kikuyu youth. Consequently, the Kikuyu invited the ancestral spirits to participate in these activities through sacrifices and observance of rituals. For instance, girls were put on a special diet to prevent blood loss and to ensure fast healing. Additionally, if a girl had broken any customary taboos, such as having sexual intercourse before the initiation,

she had to confess, following which she underwent purification. Failure to do this, the Kikuyu believed, displeased the ancestors and made the girl likely to die during the initiation.

The initiates would also participate in a ceremony called *koraria morungu*, which was an act of communion with an ancestral spirit, asking him for protection and guidance. The day before the operation, the initiates would participate in a dance called *Matuumo*, during which further appeasement of *ngoma* was done to ensure they did not interfere with the sacrifices to *Ngai*. On the night before the actual operation, the initiates received further instruction on proper conduct as members of the community. Finally, the elders of the ceremonial council administered the oath (*muuma wa anake*), during which the initiates promised to take care of the welfare of the community and never to reveal the secrets of the community to the un-initiated.

Another aspect of Kikuyu life that demonstrates ancestral veneration is the observance of *thahu*, or ritual cleanliness. For the Kikuyu, it was impossible to escape the presence of the ancestors in daily life. They controlled all aspects of life, ranging from sexual matters to even the type of food one ate and how he or she ate it. For example, if someone ate from a cracked pot, touched menstrual blood, or cohabited with a menstruating woman, he became *thahu* and needed to be cleansed.\(^{90}\) Consequently, the Kikuyu were quite vigilant in avoiding *thahu* and taking the necessary measures should they find themselves in contravention of these rituals because “no living person would

ever dream that he could hope to evade the wrath of the ngoma.\textsuperscript{91} The fear of incurring the wrath of ancestors permeated the society, and it was an integral part of holding the sociocultural fabric intact. Consequently, each member of the society strove to be ritually clean. On this issue, Muriuki writes:

The ancestors were believed to have established the basic pattern of life for all time which could be modified or adapted but could not be entirely altered lest the ancestors became offended… The fear of “what the ancestors would say was, therefore an ever-present consideration as well as a most powerful and effective political sanction among…African (indigenous) societies.\textsuperscript{92}

It is not surprising, therefore, that European administrators also noted the extreme measures that some Kikuyu took to avoid thahu. C.W Hobley, a colonial administrator, wrote:

The reality of Kikuyu life and thought may easily be underestimated, but it is important that all who wish to gain a deep insight into native affairs should understand it and give the phenomenon its true value. To give the question a practical application it may safely be said that no Kikuyu native who becomes thahu, during the course of his employment by a white master, will rest until he has been freed of his curse or ill luck, and will probably desert with wages due to him in order to get rid of it; he cannot afford to wait, the risk is too great.\textsuperscript{93}

A related aspect of the Kikuyu sociocultural life was oaths and curses. The judicial processes within the Kikuyu society were governed by oaths, which served a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, it prevented people from giving false testimony. On the other hand, it helped to prevent bribery and corruption, ensuring impartial and unbiased judgment. Of course, this does not mean that people were always honest or

\textsuperscript{91} Hobley, “Kikuyu Customs,” 440.

\textsuperscript{92} Muriuki, \textit{History of the Kikuyu}, 134.

\textsuperscript{93} Hobley, “Kikuyu Customs,” 429.
justice was never perverted. There were also other forms of oaths, which carried more weight morally and religiously. The first was *muuma*, whose symbol consisted of a lamb which was killed and whose stomach contents were mixed with herbs, water, and a little of the animal’s blood. The mixture was placed in a small hole in the ground. The concerned party had to lick a brush dipped in the mixture administered by a *mundu mugo*, saying, “If I tell a lie, let this symbol if truth kill me. If I falsely accuse anyone, let this symbol of truth kill me. If the property I am now claiming is not mine, let this symbol of truth kill me.” The second was *koringa thenge* (swearing by killing a male goat). This was usually administered in a big case involving property. The symbol was a small male goat whose limbs were broken by the concerned parties, invoking a similar fate upon themselves if they were not telling the truth. The third form of oath was *gethathi*, which was taken during murder or theft cases. The symbol of this oath was a small red stone with seven natural holes in it. The concerned parties passed several grass stalks through each hole seven times while swearing to the truth of their statements.

Women also had their own forms of oaths and curses. Common oaths among Kikuyu women were *kuringa thenge ya itumbi*, to beat the he-goat of the egg, or *ya nyungu* (of the earthen cooking pot). In extreme cases, women employed the deliberate exhibition of female genitalia, called *guturama*, to express their discontent. Since it was improper to look upon one’s mother’s nakedness, most men would hasten to remedy the situation.

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95 Ibid., 215, 216.
96 Lambert, *Kikuyu*, 100.
The common thread in these observances is reverence for the ancestors. The belief in continuity of life, the link between the land of the living and that of the dead, shaped the daily lives of the Kikuyu. This was because ancestors were believed to have established the basic pattern of life for all time, which could be modified or adapted but not entirely changed. The fear of punishment from the ancestors dictated the behavior of the Kikuyu people. It is therefore clear that observable aspects of the cultural systems, such as the above rituals, contained in them symbols that could be reproduced or changed as material realities demanded. Thus, by adhering to ancestral customs the Kikuyu were perpetuating cultural symbols that bound them together as a people. Even with changing times, these cultural symbols would always be available in one form or another to influence the Kikuyu’s interactions with the world. The following chapters will discuss the use of these cultural symbols in from the colonial period onwards

The Advent of Europeans

According to Kikuyu traditions, a Kikuyu seer called Cege wa Kabiru prophesied the arrival of strangers from out of the big water to the east. He said that they would be peculiar people, their skin color resembling that of the little white frogs, and that they would wear clothes resembling butterflies and carry sticks that spit fire. Kabiru also stated that these strangers would come with an iron snake, which would belch out fire and as it travelled east and west. This people, Kabiru warned, would threaten the Kikuyu way of life. Despite all this, the prophet strongly forbade the Kikuyu from fighting against the strangers because Kikuyu weapons would not withstand the fire-spitting sticks. They


98 No one knows the exact date of this prophetic message.
were to treat these strangers with a mix of courtesy and suspicion. While there is no way of ascertaining the spiritual significance of this prophecy, the utterance itself is quite instructive. Muriuki suggests that because Kabiru was a wealthy and renowned individual, he might have heard about the activities of the British at the coast from Swahili, Kamba, and even Arab traders. As a wise elder in the society, Kabiru would have had little difficulty foreseeing what was about to happen to his community. Even then, the fact that Kabiru chose to present this warning as a prophetic message from the ancestors illustrates how the Kikuyu utilized cultural symbols to control their interactions with foreign elements. Kabiru must have sensed that the life in Kikuyu land was about to change drastically. He was right, because the nineteenth century itself had set in motion turbulent conditions in Kikuyu land; the advent of Europeans would only accelerate the changes in the society.

By the time Europeans arrived within the borders of Kikuyu land in the 1870s, the Kikuyu society was already undergoing significant changes that facilitated its conquest. Despite its seemingly egalitarian structure, this society was inherently fractured along many alliances: clan, familial, generational, and economic. As noted above, due to the original patterns of migration and settlements, the society was divided along mbaris that were often competition with one another for resources. Nonetheless, competition for resources was not limited to mbaris. The fact that one of the key duties of a muramati (mbari spokesman) was to mediate between land issues demonstrates that competition over land among individual families within the mbari was quite common. These frictions

100 Muriuki, *History of the Kikuyu*, 137.
might have arisen when one branch of the *mbari* prospered and the other’s wealth
remained relatively stationary.\textsuperscript{101} Moreover, because of the generational hierarchy, which
favored older men, young men often found themselves without much wealth or clout
despite their important role as warriors in the community. This was because in the
indigenous social structures, avenues of generating wealth such as land and marriages
were often in the hands of older men.\textsuperscript{102} While these inequities might not have been a
challenge in the past, the 19\textsuperscript{th} century presented unique circumstances.

As the population increased, land for expansion became scarce, and animals for
raiding became fewer, it was inevitable that certain elements would increasingly become
dissatisfied with their lot in life. The presence of the British in the southern border of
Kikuyu land curtailed Kikuyu southward migration. This meant that tenants-at-will lost
all hope of ever owning land. These individuals who did not have clout within the
indigenous social structure sought other alternatives to advance themselves. One avenue
was trade. These individuals, mostly young men, joined trading caravans as porters
because it allowed them to trade and make marriages without reliance on their elders.\textsuperscript{103}
This, no doubt, reduced the amount of power the elders exerted on the youth. Moreover,
this trade was transformative, in that it allowed alternative means of wealth accumulation
for individuals who might have otherwise remained poor. These individuals proved to be
the most cooperative when Europeans arrived to enhance their power outside the
customary lines of power. Kinyanjui Gathirimu, a friend of British administrator Francis

\textsuperscript{101} M.P K. Sorrenson, *Land Reform in the Kikuyu Country: A Study in Government Policy*

\textsuperscript{102} Clark, “Land and Food,” 361.

\textsuperscript{103} Robertson, *Trouble Showed the Way*, 76.
Hall, is a good example of such individuals. Kinyanjui supported Imperial British East Africa Company (IBEAC) activities at all costs even at the expense of his own reputation within the community. While trade might have been profitable for some in the community, it did not mean improvement for women’s economic position. Whereas previously women had been key players in the trading activities of subsistence crops like beans and maize, the spread of trading caravans into the interior meant that these commodities became even more valuable. As such, men began taking an interest in this trade, further limiting economic autonomy of Kikuyu women. All of these factors would become a major source of contention within the Kikuyu society as Europeans sought to establish control.

In the 1870s, Europeans started appearing in the area as part of trading caravans. The British had been reluctant to venture into the interior of East Africa until the Germans announced that they were interested in establishing an East African colony. As a result, Britain empowered the IBEAC, a charter company, to operate in the interior. The company’s first action was to establish trading posts throughout the interior. As its representatives ventured into the interior, they encountered the Kikuyu who occupied the fertile highlands. They found that not only were the Kikuyu hard-working farmers, but also they were also keen traders. Although obviously disdainful of the Kikuyu, Joseph Thompson, a British traveler and explorer, was quite impressed by the amount of food the Kikuyu produced. He wrote:

\[104\] Muriuki, History of the Kikuyu, 93.

\[105\] Robertson, Trouble Showed the Way, 76.
Enormous quantities of sweet potatoes, yams, cassava, sugar cane, Indian corn, millet…are raised and the supply seems to be quite inexhaustible. On my return journey, I found a caravan of over 1500 men staying at Ngongo, who remained there a month and carried away little short of three months’ provisions, yet it did not seem perceptibly to affect the supply or to raise the ridiculously low prices. Extremely fat sheep and goats abound, while they have also cattle in considerable numbers.  

British interactions with the Kikuyu were complex. The first few British to go through Kikuyu territory were traders who established peaceful relations with the community. Even when Fredrick Lugard, the British administrator, established the first fort in Dagoretti in 1890, the relationship between Europeans and the Kikuyu remained amicable. This was because Lugard was careful to respect local customs. He entered into blood brotherhood with the Kikuyu, a very serious oath, and made peace treaties with a number of the Kikuyu along the southern border. Moreover, he was careful not to interfere with local disputes. Unfortunately, his successor George Wilson was not as careful to maintain peaceful relationship with the Kikuyu. For instance, when the Kikuyu burned down the fort following an incident between the Kikuyu and his men, he demanded that they pay a fine of fifty goats daily. The Kikuyu, of course, resisted this fine by fighting back. British-Kikuyu relations continued to deteriorate as the British resorted to force to quell Kikuyu resistance. The British carried several punitive expeditions against the Kikuyu in an attempt to “pacify” them. One such expedition was led by British company officers Count Telecki and Lieutenant Hohnel.  

Just like the seer Kabiru had forewarned, Kikuyu weapons were no match for the maxim gun.

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107 Ibid., 143.
In addition to the military disadvantage, the inherent divisive factors within the society made it even harder for the Kikuyu to withstand the British. For example, Hall was quick to notice and exploit the existing rivalries between the *mbaris*. In Hall’s letters, it is evident that he instituted a deliberate divide-and-rule policy. While his predecessor Lugard had been careful not to interfere in local affairs, Hall was actively involved in shaping the power struggles among the Kikuyu. Additionally, individuals such as Kinyanjui, who saw opportunities for personal advancements with Europeans, attached themselves to and supported British occupation.\textsuperscript{108} As if internal divisions were not enough, the Kikuyu were further weakened by a series of Natural disasters that plagued them from the early 1890s, which included famine, locust invasion, and small pox outbreak.\textsuperscript{109}

By the early 1900s the British had effectively managed to quell Kikuyu military resistance. This ushered a new era for the Kikuyu as they learned to live under British control. As they entered the twentieth century as subjects of British administration, they must have wondered what would become of their society. How would they respond to the changes that were overtaking their society? In light of the humiliating military defeat would they just give up? While many scholars have argued that religious movements arise in response to intense crisis as alternatives to overt resistance, it is noteworthy that there is no evidence of any religious movements among the Kikuyu. The late 1880s to the early 1900s were tumultuous years for the Kikuyu, as the society was rapidly changing in the face of European invasion and occupation. I argue that during this period of crisis, the

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\textsuperscript{108} Mungeam, “Masai and Kikuyu Responses,” 136-137.
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\textsuperscript{109} Muriuki, *History of the Kikuyu*, 155.
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crumbling of the cultural fabric caused by the attack on fundamental building blocks of the societal structure made it difficult for the Kikuyu to harness the cultural symbols necessary for religious movements. For instance, as noted above, the youth were beginning to achieve economic and therefore social autonomy without the assistance of the elders. This undermined the power of the age-set system, which was based upon generational hierarchy. As a result, the elders, who were the usual custodians of culture, were not in a position to mobilize the younger generations to action because the indigenous society was not providing them with what they needed. It was as though the elders, both living and ancestral, had failed them. However, as the next chapter will discus, this did not mean that cultural symbols were dead and useless to the Kikuyu. The Kikuyu successfully reinvented these cultural symbols, focusing on spirituality to make them relevant to the new world that they were encountering.

This chapter has examined how the pre-colonial social, political and economic organization of the Kikuyu as they were ordered by the spiritual belief systems. I have demonstrated that the belief in ancestors permeated every aspect of Kikuyu life and determined their interactions with each other and the outsiders. Nonetheless, the Kikuyu society was not without inequities and conflict. Those without wealth or clout among the Kikuyu were constantly trying to find alternative sources of power. These individuals would be among the first to cooperate with European traders, missionaries and administrators. The next chapter will highlight how European influences; especially Christianity intensified these rifts among the Kikuyu.
Chapter 3: The Kikuyu, Christianity and a Fragmented Cultural Identity

In 1895, following the dismal performance of the IBEAC in the East African territory, the British government bought out the company’s assets and declared a protectorate over the area between Uganda and the coast. The British foreign office under which the protectorate now fell selected Arthur Hardinge as commissioner. Following the takeover, the administration embarked on building the Uganda railway that would facilitate communication between the coast and Uganda. Previously, the Kikuyu had resisted the establishment of British administration in their midst but after a series of punitive expeditions, famines, smallpox epidemics, the Kikuyu became subdued. With the completion of the railway at the beginning of the 20th century, British administration in Kikuyu land became a reality.

The railway construction proved to be quite an expensive venture, causing the foreign office to look for means to make the protectorate profitable. Subsequently, the British administration started encouraging both European and Indian settlement in the fertile highlands to ensure that the protectorate was economically profitable. Nonetheless, in 1902, the colonial commissioner Sir Charles Elliot decided that settlement in the

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Highlands should be limited to Europeans. This began the attempt to make Kenya a “White Man’s Country,” like South Africa.\textsuperscript{111}

This decision marked the beginning of massive land alienation from the Kikuyu highlands that was to have a major impact on their society. By 1926, about two thousand Europeans occupied 9,000 square miles, compared to about 470,000 square miles supposedly set aside for two and a half million “natives.” Moreover, European settlers were continually putting pressure on the native owners of the land to either depart or become wage earners on the new estates. The alienation of land was accompanied by what amounted to forced labor for men, women, and children. To meet the labor needs of European farms settlers, the colonial administration instituted oppressive policies against Africans.

For example, in 1919 a circular with the signature of the Chief Native Commissioner instructed all government officials in charge of native areas to “exercise every possible lawful influence to induce able-bodied male natives to go into the labor field. Where farms are situated in the neighborhood of a native area, women and children should be encouraged to go out for such labor as they can perform.”\textsuperscript{112} To further enforce these labor policies, the colonial administration instituted the \textit{Kipande} system, which required all males over the age of 16 to be registered and carry identification.

\textsuperscript{111} Sorrenson, \textit{Land Reform}, 15-17.

This measure, along with the introduction of both the hut and the poll taxes, which could only be paid in currency, further ensured a steady supply of labor to European settlers.\[113\]

This extensive land alienation and subsequent forced labor negatively impacted the Kikuyu society in the following ways: One, forced labor created a significant destabilization of Kikuyu families. Young men were forced to leave their ancestral land to work on European farms and homes. To illustrate, Moses Thuo, who lived through this period as a young man, had the following to say:

I was born in this area (Kaguthi village, in Kenya). My father, his father and my father’s grandfather were all born here. In 1900 the white-man arrived in Nairobi. So people from this area started going to work as their servants. I followed the older boys to find work. In 1912, I became a cook.\[114\]

None of Thuo’s relatives had ever left their home village. For the first time, a member of this family left to start a new life that was previously unknown to them. It would be difficult to uphold whatever customs he was accustomed to. This sentiment is aptly expressed in the conclusions of a missionary conference on the impact of colonialism on Africans under colonialism:

Missionary experience is unanimous in emphasizing that the question of land holds a central place in the consciousness of the African peoples, and that consequently guarantees to the Native peoples that the tenure of their land is absolutely secure are essential to secure peace and goodwill among all Native communities and must be the basis of all endeavors to promote Native Welfare...The conference is convinced that in many localities the rapidly increasing demands for Native labor arising out of industrial enterprises may prejudice the healthy growth of Native communities cultivating their own lands under tribal conditions. Such Native communities provide the necessary basis for the evolution of a healthy African society, and are the only reservoir from which a supply of labor for economic development can be assured. When the demands of


\[114\] Moses Thuo, Interview by David Sandgren, March 10, 1971.
laborers for work outside the Native areas, and especially for work at a distance, are excessive, tribal life is subjected to a severe strain. The absence of adult males may reduce the amount of land under cultivation, with consequent shortage of food and undernourishment of the population, place undue burdens on the women and children...give rise to a spirit of restlessness and diminish the influence of tribal discipline. All these factors tend towards the disintegration of Native society.\textsuperscript{115}

While these statements clearly betray the missionaries’ condescending attitude and racial prejudice, they capture the reality of colonial policies on African people. Ironically, despite the obvious negative effects of colonial land and labor policies on the Kikuyu, it was the introduction of Christianity that proved to have the most extensive influence on them.

In their discussion on the role of missionaries in colonialism, Comaroff and Comaroff demonstrate that a powerful agent of colonialism was missionaries’ attempts to influence the daily existence of their African converts. Comaroff and Comaroff emphasize that missionary activities occurred on two levels. One was in the capacity to act in the domain normally defined as "the political," the arena of concrete, institutionalized power relations, and the second was in the ability to exert influence over the common-sense meanings and routine activities disseminated in the everyday world. Comaroff and Comaroff contend, “both dimensions (were) simultaneously material and symbolic, and the relationship between "religion" and "politics" plays itself out in each.” Nonetheless, the strongest impact was felt in the latter level. Comaroff and Comaroff write:

\textsuperscript{115} Notes from the 1926, Le Zoute Conference. GB. 102/1MC/CBMS/A. School of Oriental and African Studies, London.
This involves the incorporation of human subjects into the "natural," taken-for-granted forms of economy and society. And these forms lie not just in the institutional domain of "politics," but also in such things as aesthetics and religion, built form and bodily presentation, medical knowledge and the mundane habits of everyday life (Bourdieu 1977:184f.). The construction of the subject in this mold, moreover, is rarely an act of overt persuasion. It requires the internalization of a set of values, an ineffable manner of seeing and being.\textsuperscript{116}

From the above quote, it is evident that the missionaries, wittingly or unwittingly, turned their converts into proper colonial subjects by emphasizing the value of individual hard work, the value of the market place, and the sanctity of the nuclear family, among other things that embodied Western culture. While the Comaroffs’ analysis primarily applies to the South African case, these principles can be applied to the Kikuyu case.

The following section examines how the Kikuyu shaped the cultural systems available to them to adequately meet the changes that were taking place around and within their society. These cultural systems, along with their various transformations, became engrained in the collective memories of the Kikuyu, creating cultural capital from which the Kikuyu could draw upon in times of crisis.

The Establishment of Missions in Kikuyu Land

The first missionaries arrived in Kikuyu land in 1895, led by the Scottish Mission under the Rev. Thomson Watson. Missionary occupation of the highlands coincided with that of the settlers, even to the extent of acquiring land in the same oppressive manner as the other settlers. In 1899, the Catholics bought land between Nairobi and the Scottish Mission, followed by the Church of Missionary Society (CMS), which established a

station within miles of the other two missions. In 1901, African Inland Mission (AIM) established its headquarters at Kijabe, twenty-five miles from Nairobi. A year later, a Seventh-Day missionary outfit, Gospel Missionary Society (GMS), moved in a few miles northwest of Nairobi.117 When the AIM started its activities in Kijabe in 1903, it obtained a lease from the government for 1,796 acres, and a few years later added 665 more acres to its holdings. Additionally, without any title, it occupied adjacent land. The Kikuyu became the main casualties of this land-grabbing spree, as the following example demonstrates.

Because land among the Kikuyu was owned by specific mbaris, all land belonged to someone. When missionaries arrived, the Kikuyu had suffered famines, smallpox among other plagues and some had moved to other areas to find relief. Elizabeth Huxley, a later European settler notes the apparent emptiness of Kenya when Europeans first attempted to occupy it in the early 1900s. She wrote, “Men like Sir Charles Eliot and Delamere worked for white settlement and for the foundation of a new British colony…Government officials saw Kenya as a country to be occupied, pacified and then administered.”118 Despite this apparent emptiness waiting to be “occupied,” the Kikuyu had not abandoned their land. The seemingly vacant land dished out to the missionaries without any regard whatsoever to previous ownership actually belonged to specific mbaris. Accordingly, the land that AIM occupied belonged to one pioneer known as Kiherero. British administrators in the late 1890s had evicted Kiherero from his land because he fought against marauding bands of railway construction crews who frequently

117 Sorrenson, Origins, 256.

stole from his gardens. Upon seeing AIM occupation, Kiherero went to the colonial authorities to complain, but they only gave him 400 acres back, a fraction of what his land had been.\textsuperscript{119} To make matters worse Kiherero’s descendants were forced to become squatters on the land that was once theirs. This treatment made the Kikuyu wary of all Europeans, as the apophthegm, “Gutiri Mubea na Muthingu”—there is no difference between a settler and a missionary, states. Yet as the following segment demonstrates, the missionaries would bring about more changes in their societies than the colonial government would. These changes would cause internal religious divisions among the Kikuyu that would last into the post-independence period.

In order to understand how the spread and growth of Christianity impacted the Kikuyu, I use John Lonsdale’s model. In this model, Lonsdale categorizes the growth of Kikuyu Christianity in three phases that reflected the changes that were taking place within the Kikuyu society. The first stage in the early 1910s saw the lower strata of the Kikuyu society embrace Christianity as a means to access status. The second stage was the reconciliatory period of the 1920s, where those who had converted into Christianity and alienated other members of the society attempted to return to the communal fold, and the final stage is the revival period of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{120} It is important to note that these periods overlapped and did not necessarily occur in succession.

\textsuperscript{119} Sandgren, \textit{Kikuyu and Christianity}, 32.

\textsuperscript{120} Lonsdale, “Kikuyu Christianities,” 209.
The Spread of Christianity among the Kikuyu in the Early 1900s

As seen above, in the mid-nineteenth century, Kikuyu society underwent changes that led to the increase of landless kinless individuals. These individuals were among the first pioneers to join Christian missions. Even then, as it became clearer to other members of the society that there were distinctive benefits to being a mission adherent, the number of converts increased across the board. For example, missions provided shelter to refugees who had lost access to their indigenous land. Additionally, those who were part of the mission were exempt from forced labor at the initial stages colonization and later during the First World War. As the war progressed and more men were required for the service, mission adherents were given lighter duties compared to the rest of the group. 121 Mission centers became a place of refuge for those who were fleeing the less desirable elements of their own culture, such as forced early marriages and poverty. Others were fleeing from the gerontocratic control of their society and found the Christian teachings appealing. One such individual was Daniel Nduti he ran away to the missions because:

The Lord was calling us. Our fathers were beating us severely but I chose to go because I was willing. The missionaries were giving us bananas and other small gifts but this did not at all interest me. All I knew was that God was calling me. Ngai whom our fathers, worshipped under trees was not calling me but the God of Christians was calling me. 122

Moreover, individuals also flocked to the mission centers for the literacy classes that were offered there. 123

121 Sandgren, Ibid., 36.
122 Daniel Nduti, Interview by David Sandgren, December 29th, 1970.
123 Sandgren, Kikuyu and Christianity, 38.
As the number of those who converted to Christianity increased, so did tensions within the society. For instance, the AIM mission required its members to isolate themselves from the rest of Kikuyu society. It even encouraged them to take up residence on the station for the whole year. This isolation, while favorable for the growth of their new faith, meant disassociation with the rest of their society. This led to multiple tensions that continue to weaken the already compromised Kikuyu cultural fabric. The fact that young people could now evade the commands of their elders undermined the generational authority that held the society together. Moreover, the physical absence of these individuals from their home *mbaris* also meant that the age-set system that held the Kikuyu society together was weakened. And finally, as a result of mission religious instruction that labeled all things African evil, some overzealous converts began going round destroying sacred trees and other instruments of divination. All of these factors created tensions within the Kikuyu society that would soon be intensified during the next stage of expansion of Christianity.

**Growth of Christianity among the Kikuyu in the 1920s**

The *Reconciliation* period was “a creative attempt to translate the former, pre-colonial, moral discourse of age, generation and clan obligation into the basis of a new people whose redemptive colonial narrative of endurance, duty and salvation was prefigured in the Bible.” Lonsdale argues that for this first generation of mission adherents, reconciliation was tantamount to saving “true Kikuyuness from extinction.” These converts reasoned that the only way to save the Kikuyu society was by re-integrating

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124 Ibid.

125 Lonsdale, “Kikuyu Christianities,” 207.
themselves back into it. The first stage of growth had seen many of them abandoning their cultures, albeit superficially, to follow the Christian missions at the expense of Kikuyu society. By the 1920s, there was a general feeling among these early converts that, since they had learned the way of the white man, they were in a position to educate their community on how to deal with colonialism. Christianity was the way through which they could save their community. This rationale is evident in the following quote from the then only Kikuyu newspaper *Muigithania*. In a letter to the editor, one Ng’ondu wa Kabuitu wrote the following:

And now people are puzzled at the state of the Kikuyu characteristics and have forgotten the nature of the course of our ancestor “Kikuyu.” And now I return great thanks on account of that book called “Muigithania” because since it started to declare the things that really pertain to real Kikuyu nationality, it is now gathering together the seeds that until then had been in the bush. For I rejoice greatly for *Muigithania* advising us what Kikuyu characteristics are…especially do I return great thanks on account of those who are advising us to the assistance which shall save the children of Mumbi (the Kikuyu) before Jehovah, that he may lead them so that they may increase in zeal especially as regards the principal features of pure Kikuyu nationality and for the purpose of raising up those who are in the caves and those who are bound by the many bonds of the things that have come upon us which have obscured the real, true Kikuyu characteristics.\(^{126}\)

The author, evidently a Christian, invokes Jehovah, the God of the Bible, asking him to lead the Kikuyu to their roots in order to break free from the chains of colonialism. From his language, it is clear the he does not view Christianity as part of the hegemony that oppresses them but rather a means to freedom. Since *Ngai* was also God of other races, becoming a Christian did not mean corruption of one’s Kikuyuness. This reconciliation

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\(^{126}\) Ng’ondu wa Kabuitu, “Preserving Kikuyu Characteristics,” August 1929, *Muigithania*, DC/MKS. 10B/13/1, Kenya National Archives, henceforth KNA.
evidently called for a lot of negotiation and compromises that had become part of the Kikuyu culture.

Like many other African communities that encountered colonialism, the adoption of Christianity did not mean a break from their own cultural backgrounds. The Kikuyu viewed and embraced Christianity from a uniquely Kikuyu world view and longed to practice Christianity not as Europeans did, but rather as Kikuyus. Missionary churches did not allow them that freedom. Subsequently, by the early 1920s the first Kikuyu adherents began to leave the mission stations and form church stations where they could exercise more freedom in their way of worship. Before this, missionaries dictated liturgy and the practice of Christianity. This did not leave much room for the emergence of a localized form of Christianity. During the next decade, the African-run centers moved the center of Kikuyu Christianity from mission churches to the frontiers. As a result, the mission-educated Kikuyus begun taking Christianity to the interior, where European missions had not reached, becoming the prime agents of transmissions.¹²⁷ This allowed the emergence of a distinctively Kikuyu Christianity that was more African in outlook than it was European.

The emergence of a distinctly African Christianity is not a recent phenomenon. Adrian Hastings contends that from the mid-fifteenth century there has been “a long conversation between Christian and African cosmologies,”¹²⁸ leading to a two-way transformation process deeply rooted in the relevant cultural milieu. Lamin Sanneh suggests that this conversation has largely been facilitated by the ideological

¹²⁷ Sandgren, Christianity and the Kikuyu, 2.

inclusiveness of many African cosmologies. He further posits that due recognition should be given to the concept of ‘enclavement’ which he credits with giving institutional “stimulus to the tradition of inclusiveness without total assimilation [and] the dynamic, volatile aspect of traditional religions in transition, an aspect which attempts to reconstitute and re-direct new religious materials on the basis of pre-existing dispositions.”\textsuperscript{129} Enclavement allowed Africans to integrate foreign ideologies into their own world-view without necessarily shunning the old. This integration is evident in the manner in which the Kikuyu adopted and practiced Christianity.

The emergence of distinctively African Christianity is not a peculiarly Kikuyu phenomenon; African history is rife with examples of distinctively African Christianities. An example can be found in sixteenth-century Congo kingdom. Following the initial contact with Christianity, the Congolese began integrating Christian ideologies into their indigenous worldview, which resulted into the emergence of a distinct version of Christianity that allowed multiple interpretations of religious icons. Due to the shortage of European priests, many ordinary Congolese converted to Christianity through African lay-clergy. These individuals then developed a version of Christianity that incorporated many elements of the Congolese beliefs, such as the Congo cosmogram, which resembles the Christian cross. Jason Young writes, “The cross likely stood as a symbol of dual significance from which participants could draw a variety of meanings, both Christian and non-Christian.”\textsuperscript{130} The cosmogram came to have multiple meanings in the minds of


\textsuperscript{130} Jason Young, \textit{Rituals of Resistance African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Low country South in the Era of Slavery} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 57.
Congolese peasant: it came to represent the continuity of the cycle of life as described in Congolese beliefs and the Christian symbol of salvation.\textsuperscript{131} Thus, Africans’ reinvention and reinterpretation of Christianity is nothing new in itself. Indeed as Hastings has argued, throughout history, Africans have had a large hand in making their Christianities—even when it seemed that they had lost their narrative power, that is, during the heyday of white missionary and colonial domination.\textsuperscript{132}

In creating distinctively Kikuyu Christianity, these early converts were seeking to reconcile their newfound faith with their indigenous cultural systems. Many of these Kikuyus saw no contradiction in being a Christian and embracing elements of Kikuyu culture such as female circumcision or even polygamy. For a while, missionaries continued to tolerate these practices until the late 1920s during the episode that came to be known as the “circumcision crisis.” In 1929, a representative conference among the mission churches in Kikuyu land was held in Tumu Tumu to discuss what was to be done about the practice of female initiation. They resolved the following: the custom is evil and should be abandoned by all Christians, and that all submitting to it should be suspended by “churches everywhere.”\textsuperscript{133} The decision led to suspension of both teachers and students who participated or allowed the practice.

This issue polarized all concerned groups among the Kikuyu society into two bitter and antagonistic groups: On the one hand there were Christian missionaries and a

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{132} Hastings, \textit{The Church in Africa}, 448.

\textsuperscript{133} Church of Scotland Mission, “Memorandum, Prepared by The Kikuyu Mission Council,” 1931, p. 35. DC/FH/3/1/2, KNA.
number of their first central station adherents who insisted that female circumcision was so antithetical to the faith that those who continued its practice should be thrown out of the church and barred from education in mission schools. On the other hand there were the younger converts from the newly founded outstations, who insisted that Kikuyu customs, such as female circumcision, were compatible with Christian teachings. The latter group chose to leave the missions and to begin their own schools and churches. This came to be known as the independent church movement. Members of the independent church movement were the key players in this reconciliation period.

Moses Thuo, a participant in this separation stated the following about why many left the mission churches:

The reason why many left the church was because of this idea of a ‘new church’. The reason we called it new was because of the fact that the teaching which it brought of stopping girls’ circumcision was foreign to us. This was the reason why I and many others were not baptized in the mission and came to start the independent (churches).

As noted previously, initiation was central to Kikuyu culture. Initiation, and the accompanying age-set system for both males and females, was cultural symbol that held Kikuyu society together. It is not surprising that the Kikuyu were not ready to abandon the one aspect that allowed one to be fully integrated into the society. Sandgren writes:

The circumcision crisis was more than an outburst caused by an accumulation of restraints pent up for a period of three decades...Kikuyu society was already under severe strain, with large numbers having to live away from home while...

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134 Sandgren, Christianity and the Kikuyu, 3.

135 For more information on independent church movements in Kikuyu land see, Welbourn, East African Rebels, 144-161.

136 Moses Thuo, Interview by David Sandgren, March 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1971.
laboring or Europeans. To sweep away the system used for teaching traditional values and morality would completely undermine the society.  

These Christians did not see anything wrong following their Kikuyu customs such as female circumcision and other observances of Thahu. To illustrate, one Christian Kikuyu man, Charles Ngundo, in a letter to the editor, begs his fellow Kikuyus not to abandon the practice of initiation and the age-set system. He even suggests that the Kikuyu Christians who no longer partook of the indigenous brew that accompanied initiation ceremonies “could make tea and prepare food in a Christian manner, instead of the brew so that their children can find a place to meet their elders properly.” The circumcision issue brought to the forefront the resilient nature of Kikuyu cultural systems. Despite the fact that the Kikuyu had largely embraced Christianity, they did not allow their culture to disappear. Nonetheless, rather than unifying the Kikuyu into one universal faith, Christianity became a source of divisions that would last well into the post-colonial period.

**The Revival Period in the 1930s**

The third stage of growth of Christianity in Kikuyu land, the Revival period, was marked by internal conflict between different religious factions. It was during this time that the praying churches known as the Arathi emerged. These groups called for strict observances of ritual purity and the heeding of the Holy Spirit. The Arathi condemned the Kikuyu independent churches for failing to follow Biblical guidance. They argued that the independents had become unclean by trying to reconcile indigenous Kikuyu

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137 Sandgren, *Christianity and the Kikuyu*, 81.

customs with the Bible. Daniel Nduti, a member of these churches, said the following about listening to the Holy Spirit:

[we] had to form their own church because they saw that the things done by the independent church were not the things the Holy spirit wanted. We could not be allowed back into the missions. However, even if we were we could not go, because the works by the men cannot match with the work of the Holy Spirit.  

Additionally, the praying churches interpreted the Gospels as being against material wealth and political involvement. This was contrary to the practices of the Independent churches that called for the reconciliation between Kikuyu and Christian worldviews and an active participation in politics. It is therefore not a surprise that these older Christians looked at the praying churches in contempt.

This religious divide accurately represented the socio-economic and cultural divide that existed among the Kikuyu in the 1930s. By this time there was a generation of the Kikuyu that had grown up entirely under colonialism. Many members of the Arathi churches belonged to the lower social strata. These individuals formed the bulk of the landless that were forced to work on European farms or in low-paying jobs in towns. At the same time, those of the independent churches were now reaping the benefits of mission education. It is not surprising therefore, that members of independent churches formed the bulk of the elite among the Kikuyu. The diversity of Kikuyu Christianities that emerged is an especially important cultural heritage from which later generations

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139 Daniel Nduti, interview by David Sandgren, December 29, 1970.
140 Ibid., 218.
would borrow. This diversity was often a source of tension within the Kikuyu society. A close look at the Arathi, or prophets (also known as Aroti, dreamers), demonstrates these tensions within Kikuyu society.

**The Arathi (Watu Wa Mungu)**

Early members of the Arathi movement credit its genesis to divine instruction. The following is Joshua Ng’ang’a’s account of how the movement’s founder Joseph Ng’ang’a received his calling.

One day, a young man called Ng’ang’a was on his way home after a night of drunkenness but he could not make it home. He fell asleep by the roadside. In his sleep he heard a voice calling him and though it stopped, he knew that it was God’s. He went back to sleep. The strange thing about it is that the voice called him Joseph and he was not baptized by then. In the morning, he looked for footmarks but found none. He became conscious that it was God’s call. He took the beer he had been preparing and gave it to others and also the apparatus. God then started speaking to him. He first told him to pray so that God might first save him. After this, he was asked to pray so that God might save his people from the rulers who ruled them. After being called, Ng’ang’a who had now adopted his received name Joseph went into seclusion for three years, while he prayed and read the bible. Ng’ang’a was fed by his mother and looked after for three years. His only activity during those years was to go out, relieve himself, come back and wash himself and then go into the house of God to pray.

It is noteworthy that Joseph heard God’s voice speaking to him. I argue that the idea of direct communication with God signified a cultural shift in the mind of the Kikuyu youth, who up to the beginning of the 20th-century had grown up in a society where God was too remote to be bothered with individuals.

143 Joshua Ng’ang’a, Interview by David Sandgren, March 19, 1971.

144 It was in the same year, 1926, that the Kikuyu translation of the scriptures became available.

145 Musa Muchai, interview by David Sandgren, April 14, 1972.

Following the initial encounter, Ng’ang’a began collecting other individuals from all over Kikuyu land, who claimed to have received divine messages, in his home area around Kambui, in Kiambu. By the 1930s, their numbers increased and they began to preach among their communities. An early member of the movement described the expansion of the movement this way:

After Joseph Ng’a’ang’a was called by God, he was ordered to start his church and also to teach others to assist him in preaching this new religion. Then he got himself faithful followers like Daudi Mukundi, Paul Ngwiri, Henry Maina and Titus Gitano. These helped him in preaching the word. Paul Ngwiri preached around Kijabe area, Titus preached where Moses (Moses Thuo) now preaches and also Muguru. From there they went to Mount Kenya area, then Munge in Meru. They were the ones who started uttering the sounds we now make.¹⁴⁷

These events marked the beginning of the movement that came to be variously known as Arathi, (prophets), Aroti (Dreamers), or Watu wa Mungu (people of God) according to the official government documents.

The Arathi movement was a group of prophets or seers that gained popularity in the period following the “circumcision crisis.” Members of this movement claimed to receive messages from God directly in dreams or visions. Nonetheless, even within the movement, there were different strands. A close examination of the Arathi movement demonstrates ways in which some members of the Kikuyu society transformed cultural symbols to reflect the changes that were taking place in the society. It seems that the Arathi were mainly young disenfranchised individuals who had failed to fit in the existing echelons. It thus makes sense that they were not geographically limited to one area but seemed to belong to a group of people seeking to reassert their individual identity in a society that was fast running out of space for people like them. They were

¹⁴⁷ Joshua Kimani Ng’ang’a, Interview by David Sandgren, February 17th, 1971.
distinguishable by their white sheets, which they claimed the Holy Spirit had instructed them to wear instead of European clothing.

For the most part, the government considered them little more than a nuisance. The *Arathi* went about their business without disturbing the peace except when they held their meetings and growled noisily. Nonetheless, the situation rapidly changed following a tragic episode involving members of the *Arathi* and police officers in February of 1934. The police were looking for a murder suspect, Njoroge wa Mukone, in the Ndaragu forest when they encountered three *Arathi*: Nungara wa Karaka, Samuel Muinami, and Ng’ang’a the founder. The police officers claimed that these individuals shot at them with arrows, forcing them to respond in self-defense. This led to the death of the three individuals. Following this event, the government started to pay close attention to the *Arathi*, especially since they were getting connected to rumors of weapons manufacture. When they were arrested, the *Arathi* claimed that the Holy Spirit had authorized them. There is no evidence that these individuals ever planned to launch violent attacks on the colonial administration. The divisional chief of Dagoretti in 1934 wrote:

On Tuesday 13.3.34, I went to I.A. Mission in Kijabe, there I met Revd John Nyenjeri and by his help we understood how matters were more than before, I went to Musa Muchai (one of the leaders of the Arathi), he was not at home when I arrived there, I went to Hesron Njoroge was Kiritu, there I found, Musa Muchai with his followers, more than 10 in number they were sitting down, I asked them what they were doing, they replied that they were waiting to pray to God, I asked them what they were making arrows, for, they said, that they needed arrows to pray God on the Longonot Hills, for their protection.  

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148 Central Police Annual Police Report, 1934, PC/CP 4/3/1, KNA.

149 Divisional chief to Kiambu DC, March 18, 1934. PC/CP/8/7/3 D.C. KNA.
The fact that the reporting officer was a Kikuyu further demonstrates the underlying tensions that existed within various segments of the Kikuyu society. It is possible to argue that the local clergy were threatened by the rapid expansion of the Arathi at the expense of their own established churches. The Arathi themselves felt that members of Independent churches instigated these allegations against them. Joshua Kimani, an early member of the Arathi stated the following:

Even these leaders (Kikuyu) of our areas were the ones who were spreading who were spreading propaganda about us and stimulated the government to hate and arrest us. We were arrested and taken to Murang’a for arrest and were kept a man and a woman and they alleged that we had taken them as wives and had gone to the bush with them. We were twelve of us. All those who took us were Christians and the chief took us to court and we were imprisoned for three months. From there the D.C reduced the imprisonment to forty days instead of ninety.\(^\text{150}\)

Indeed, as many contemporary government reports demonstrate, the attitude of other Kikuyu Christians towards the Arathi was one of contempt and suspicion. Because of their refusal to participate in politics, their strict observance of ritual cleanliness, and their repudiation of indigenous practices, the Arathi found themselves isolated from the rest of Kikuyu society.\(^\text{151}\)

Following the events of early 1934, Kiambu District Commissioner, at the behest of his African subordinates, proposed to ban all meetings of the Arathi, or Watu wa Mungu, as they were referred to in official records, arguing that without such an order, he was “doubtful as to how to deal with the activities of this sect.”\(^\text{152}\) In April 1934, a native

\(^{150}\) Joshua Kimani Ng’ang’a, interview by David Sandgren, Feb 17th, 1971.

\(^{151}\) Kenyatta, \textit{Facing Mount Kenya}, 277.

\(^{152}\) D.C Kiambu to P.C. Kiambu “Political Unrest 1934-42” March 31, 1934, PC/CP/8/7/3, KNA.
authority ordinance was issued prohibiting holding or attending any *Arathi* meetings. This action was deemed necessary to maintain peace. Following the issue of the ordinance, several members of the *Arathi* movements in Kiambu and Nakuru were arrested for holding their now-illegal meetings. Despite this action, it seems that the government was not too eager to implement measures that could lead to unrest among the Kikuyu. This is evident in the communication between the district commissioner and the central provincial commissioner. In his first response to the district commissioner’s request, the provincial commissioner of the central province wrote that such a sweeping order was not necessary.\(^{153}\) But as tensions escalated among the Kikuyu themselves, between the colonial government and missionaries, such a preventative action became necessary. Despite these conflicts, the *Watu wa Mungu* continued their activities quietly in the central province and surrounding regions.

**Early Activities of the *Arathi* Movement in the Early 1930s**

Other than what the *Arathi* themselves said about themselves, much of what we know from the nascent stages of the *Arathi* movement comes from colonial officials’ records and from the founding members. The colonial records, although racially biased, contained some useful pointers. For instance, upon arresting several members of the group in Nakuru, the assistant superintendent of police wrote the following:

> They were apprehended without resistance, and make no secret of their religious beliefs, being only too willing to discuss the subject…I have had several lengthy conversations with the *Watu wa Mungu* and from notes taken at these have recorded a form of statement from the leading and most talkative member (Kagana wa Chege) This may appear bizarre but care has been taken to adhere to

\(^{153}\) P.C Kiambu to D.C Kiambu, “*Watu wa Mungu,*** April 4, 1934, PC/CP/8/7/3, KNA.
accurately to the natives account of his experiences. The scriptural passages quoted together with many of no particular significance were all found and indicated by him in his Kikuyu or Swahili Bible. The talk of the others is on very similar lines showing they have had the same hallucinations and all aver that they not been taught their form of religion from anybody and that they did not know there are others elsewhere who have identical beliefs… They all appear to be quite sincere and fanatical. Certain of them have tried prophesying but this has not been successful.154

From the above excerpt, we learn that *Watu wa Mungu* or *Arathi* appear to have looked for opportunities to spread their religious beliefs. It is also evident they relied on dreams as a means of receiving divine messages. Indeed, it is the dreams that separated them from other Kikuyu churches. It is also noteworthy that members of this movement were well versed in the scriptures, a fact that this European official finds “bizarre.” This might have to do with the fact that by 1926, a Kikuyu translation of the Greek scriptures and the a few books from the Hebrew Scriptures was completed. Despite acknowledging the Kikuyu’s superior use of the scriptures, the assistant superintendent resorted to the usual colonial dismissive attitude by stating that they were “merely natives who were suffering from religious hysteria.”155

Another official had the following to say about the *Arathi*:

“*These false prophets profess to be evangelists of a new faith amongst other tenets of their faith teach the following* 

a. No European clothes to be worn, only skins or white cukas  
b. No huts to be build; adherents to live in grass shacks.  
c. No *shambas* to be dug or planted as Jehovah will provide food for his followers.  
d. No one must go to Government or mission schools

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154 D.C. Assistant superintendent of police to the commissioner of police, “Watu wa Mungu” May 21, 1934, PC/CP/8/7/3, KNA.  
155 Ibid.
e. No body must be baptized at a Mission.”

Of course, the *Arathi* belief system went beyond the few points that the officer raised. The following section examines these belief systems and their relationship to Kikuyu and Christian ideologies.

**Arathi Beliefs and Practices**

On September 9, 1933, prominent individuals among the *Arathi*, Joseph Ng’ang’a including Mose Thuo, John Waweru and Jeremia Mutu, along with 30 others, met to discuss what would become the formal *Arathi* doctrine. This was just a few months before the death of Ng’ang’a at the hands of the police. Members would later say that Ng’ang’a had foretold his death. Without any formal structure, the *Arathi* had only been known for their roaring sounds and dreams. The meeting resulted in the following list of beliefs:

1. There would be twelve men representing each village to oversee the churches under their jurisdiction
2. They were to wear white clothes, young or old, regardless of whatever activities they were engaged in.
3. When they went to worship, they were to repeat the following prayer:
   
   **Our Father who is at Heaven (x3)**
   
   **I will be answering your voice (x3)**

   Let it be Oh Father whatever you have decided (x3)

4. They were to have confessions and if any one heard a voice, the twelve men would inquire into it through the spirit to ensure everything was right.
5. Baptism and confirmation: These were to occur in two separate days.

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156 DC Fort Hall to PC Kikuyu Province, 30 March 1931, DC/FH.2/1/4, KNA.

6. Marriage and weddings must be considered and be well understood by all members of our church, we Aroti.
7. Doing what is prophesied in the book and the by Spirit must be judged according to the Spirit.
8. Hair and accompanying regulations were to be determined by what God says and adhered to accordingly.
9. Gifts of servants should be given as the Lord has ordered.
10. About Women, must observe ritual cleansing upon birth.
11. The decision of going for pilgrimages was determined and inquired into by the 12 men to prevent any misfortunes en route.\textsuperscript{158}

Despite their attempt to repudiate their indigenous cultural elements,\textsuperscript{159} these rules indicate that the \textit{Arathi} continued to be influenced by their own cultural worldview as much as they were influenced by biblical admonitions. This can be seen in two areas central to the \textit{Arathi} belief system: prophecy and ritual cleansing.

\textbf{Thahu}

Earlier, the chapter examined discussed the inclusive nature of African religious worldviews, which allowed for the co-existence of multiple overlapping and, at times, conflicting cultural symbols. This multiplicity is evident in the selection of things that the \textit{Arathi} considered unclean. For example, touching a dead body among the Kikuyu was considered \textit{thahu} that required cleansing.\textsuperscript{160} The \textit{Arathi} had a similar observance, in that anyone who came into contact with a dead body was to stay isolated and cleanse himself on the first, third, and seventh days.\textsuperscript{161} In the Levitical law, anyone who came into

\textsuperscript{158} Joshua Ng’ang’a, Interview by David Sandgren, April 1, 1971.

\textsuperscript{159} Murray, “Kikuyu Spirit Churches,” 202.


contact with a corpse would be ritually unclean until the seventh day.\textsuperscript{162} Given the close resemblance between these rituals, it is not necessary to attempt determine the roots of these practices. This is because rather than being Manichean, many African societies existed in “theologically plural worlds,” which allowed for the existence of multiple overlapping and sometimes competing cosmologies.\textsuperscript{163} This was most evident in the translation of the Bible and its message into the Kikuyu language. As much as missionaries tried to avoid overlapping Christian and indigenous beliefs, it was almost impossible. For example, how could the missionaries speak to the Kikuyu about an all-powerful god without the Kikuyu thinking about \textit{Ngai}?\textsuperscript{164} In the case of ritual cleanliness, the fact that the Kikuyu bible translated ritual uncleanness as \textit{thahu} no doubt spoke to the Kikuyu cultural background of the \textit{Arathi}. The \textit{Arathi} were also known to observe other Levitical observances such as during the following events: childbirth, the Sabbath, sexual intercourse, menstruation among others. It seems that these prohibitions cut across both Biblical and Kikuyu indigenous customs.

How can we account for this seemingly contradictory behavior? We can borrow from Mary Douglas’s treatment of what was considered holy under the Levitical law. She writes:

\begin{quote}
Any interpretation will fail, which takes the Do-Nots of the Old Testament piecemeal fashion. The only sound approach is to forget hygiene, aesthetics, morals and instinctive revulsion…and start with the texts. Since each of the injunctions is prefaced by the command to be holy so they must be explained by
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{162} Numbers 19: 11-12, 16.

\textsuperscript{163} Lonsdale, “Kikuyu Christianities,” 214.

that command. There must be contrariness between holiness and abomination, which would make overall sense of all the particular restrictions…we can conclude that holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals should conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused.¹⁶⁵

Murray suggests that by applying the above principle to the Kikuyu worldview, we can understand the logic behind the seemingly incompatible rules of thahu.¹⁶⁶ Thus it does not matter if the Arathi repudiated certain elements of the Kikuyu thahu. The important thing is that they adhered to the general rules of wholeness. I thus posit that the Athomi drew from their Kikuyu cultural cosmology, not specific rules of dos and don’ts, but rather for fundamental principles.

Prophecy

The other key element of the Arathi was prophecy. By the very name Arathi, it is evident that prophecy and accompanying dreams were central to their core ideology. Their name stems from the Kikuyu word urathi, which translates to prophecy. The concept of prophecy among the Arathi owes its origin to both the Kikuyu and Christian traditions. Among the Kikuyu, a murathi, (singular) a seer, was different from a diviner or a medicine man. According to Kenyatta, a murathi communicated directly with God to receive instructions on how to deal with specific crisis in the society.¹⁶⁷ Among the Kikuyu, the Arathi came from a specific age group of elders. Nonetheless, following the availability of the Kikuyu translation of the Bible, members of the Arathi found the

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justification for assuming prophetic roles despite their youth in Acts 2: 17-21, which states:

In the last days… I will pour out my Spirit on all Flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams; yea and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my spirit; and they shall prophesy.

Here, again, the Arathi found elements that were deeply steeped in the Kikuyu cultural backgrounds but which also were strongly supported in the scriptures.

The same environment that allowed for the existence of multiple, often-competing cosmologies also meant that tensions would be inevitable. This allowed for open interpretation of scripture that soon led to divisions among the Arathi. Some members of the movement sought a less strict form of religion. By the 1960s, the movement had been registered by the government and was considered a formal church. Moses Thuo, one of the leaders, felt that the Arathi doctrine was too strict and unscriptural. He wanted to be free to engage in political activity even though Arathi doctrine prohibited it. Moreover, he felt that since polygyny was supported in the scriptures, the Arathi should be allowed to practice it. When he brought these suggestions to the other leaders, the suggestions were denied. The remaining founders of the movement felt that anyone who had betrayed the original teachings of the church had no place in their midst. With that, Thuo left and formed his new church. These internal divisions within the Arathi movement mirrored the trends within the larger society. The Kikuyu were now divided along doctrinal issues. Concerning these divisions, Lonsdale states:

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169 Moses Thuo, Interview by David Sandgren, March 10, 1971; Joshua Ng’ang’a, Interview by David Sandgren, April 1, 1971.
In the 1920s Christians were divided on the compatibility of Christ and clitoridectomy, on how far faith should replace custom. Some left the missions to lead independent churches with a Christian-national project. Others founded ‘praying’ churches for which any politics was an offense to the Spirit. In the 1930s others still were swept into mission churches ‘Revival’ which fostered love for white brethren who were similarly ‘broken’.¹⁷⁰

These divisions would have a major impact on how the Kikuyu would react during the intensive socio-cultural and economic crisis following WWII, as the following section demonstrates. Fredrick Cooper cautions against the indiscriminate division of African history into colonial and post-colonial periods without questioning what the acquisition of sovereignty actually meant to the Africans. He contends that doing so gives a false impression of a clean break between the colonial and the post-colonial period, ignoring the continued social economic and political imbalances.¹⁷¹ He therefore suggests examining African modern history from a particular moment:

> When the rule of European colonial powers over most of the African continent began to fall apart, when Africans mobilized to claim new futures, when the day-to-day realities of life in cities and villages changed rapidly.¹⁷²

**WWII, Religious Rivalry and the Mau Mau**

WWII brought about significant changes within Kikuyu society. In this section, however, I emphasize the war’s impact the on the land tenure system, as this was the basis of Kikuyu social organization.¹⁷³ Due to population increase and wartime demands of increased food production, the Kikuyu experienced acute land shortages. This resulted

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¹⁷⁰ Lonsdale, “Kikuyu Christianity,” 207.


¹⁷² Ibid., 2.

in many Kikuyu landowners abandoning the indigenous custom of allowing *ahoi* (tenants-at-will) to cultivate *mbari* land, or in some cases transforming the arrangement into a rental agreement. All these factors led to an increase in the number of landless individuals. To illustrate, between 1934 and 1948 an estimated 184,000 Kikuyu were forced out of the reserves due to these harsh conditions. By the mid-1940s, this problem had become big enough for the colonial administration to notice. One annual report stated, “[there] a large landless class growing up in this district which is asking what Government is going to do for them and hoping that…additional settlement areas will be made available.” These individuals continued to flock to the “praying” churches, which they felt addressed their immediate problems. As noted previously, by the late 1930s the Kikuyu were deeply divided along doctrinal lines, which, in turn, shaped the nature of their responses to the socio-economic and cultural changes. Those who belonged to the Independent and mission-supported churches, enjoyed relative economic prosperity compared to those who belonged to the ‘praying’ churches. It is quite possible that the landless and poor belonging to the latter churches were jealous of their more materially wealthy counterparts. On this issue, Lonsdale notes, “from the 1930s …Competitive white and black rural capitalisms had emerged; and private property, by denying its social debts, evoked a rising fear of envious witchcraft between Africans no less than a growing resentment of white settlerdom.”


177 Lonsdale, “Kikuyu Christianities,” 209
Perhaps nowhere else did these divisions become more manifest than during the Mau Mau insurrection of the 1950s. While there have been numerous studies of this movement, with the majority focusing on the immediate socio-economic and political hardships, these studies have often ignored the divisive effect of the multiple ideologies that influenced the resistance strategies the Kikuyu employed during this period. I argue that while it is undeniable that the Mau Mau movement had its roots in the socio-economic crises the Kikuyu were experiencing, its motivating ideologies were rooted in the inherited fragmented cultural identity, based on religious divisions and reinforced by socio-economic inequities.

Commendably though, recent studies on the Mau Mau have attempted to go beyond the immediate socio-economic contexts. One such example is David Branch’s study, which challenges previous macro-paradigms, such as good and evil, gender, nationalism, Marxist revolution, social conflict, institutionalism and religion, used to study the insurrection. He contends that “these lenses have been set too wide and that they assume that the violence followed the pattern of pre-war societal-level cleavages.” Branch asserts that the weakness of these macro-level approaches lies in the fact that they ignore “the geographical distribution, its intimacy, the frequent retrospective attribution

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179 See above footnote for these studies.
of ideology by actors of non-ideologically driven acts of violence, and underestimation of the extent to which civil war profoundly altered the conduct of political competition within local communities.”

While I concur with Branch’s assertion that sweeping generalizations of such a movement seldom give a true picture of events and that it is crucial to pay attention to the micro-level events, especially when it comes to the perpetration of the violent acts, Branch denies the obvious role of religious ideology in the movement. He contends that “the great Mass of the Kikuyu population…dealt in the currency of survival rather than ideology, lending the civil war its chief characteristic: ambiguity.” In making this statement, Branch assumes that ideology in itself is static and rigid and therefore irrelevant in times of trouble. In fact, the very nature of ideology is flexibility and adaptation in the face of intense crisis. Indeed, the changing interpretation of a previously held thought is characteristic of all cultural elements. Additionally, while it is true that these individuals were concerned with survival, they were not responding to these dangers from within a cultural vacuum. Indeed, the way they expressed their despair even to one another through language is evidence of the centrality of culture in such circumstances.

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180 Italics are mine.
182 Ibid.
Additionally, Branch, citing Stathis Kalyvas, contends that “rather than pre-war political affinities, personal ideology, or post-war identity, …control [is] a far more accurate indicator of an individual’s wartime allegiance. Control of an area by one warring party or the other is likely to engender support for that party from the local population.” He further adds, “individuals appear more successful in co-opting resources from representatives of those macro-level cleavages to serve their own locally rooted purposes.” While this might be true, there cannot be true control without an accompanying ideological framework. As Comaroff argues, “pragmatic action [does] not occur in an ideological vacuum: powerful symbolic mechanisms underpin temporary socio-political arrangements, and infused perceptions of the possibilities of practice.”

In explaining consensus in times of crisis, Asef Bayart coins the concept of “imagined solidarity,” which he explains thusly: “consensus [which] may be achieved not simply by an actor’s real understanding of their shared interests, but also by their imagining commonality with others-by imagined solidarities.” Thus, a group of people may act together united in a supposedly uniform course only to later realize they had only imagined their oneness of thought. Upon realizing the fallacy, these individuals may shift alliances, as was the case during the Mau Mau conflict. Subsequently, “while historical processes that ensue [d] cannot be understood merely as the product of the purposive interaction of those involved, it [is] through such culturally mediated practice that transformations [are] realized on the ground.”

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actions of people in survival mode does not capture the whole picture. Violent acts are usually more of an outward manifestation of underlying tensions, as was the case among the Kikuyu.

Consequently, I argue that to better the nature of the *Mau Mau* conflict, it is necessary to examine prevailing ideologies among the Kikuyu. Indeed, since Christianity had been a big part of the Kikuyu’s collective psyche, it is inevitable that it would have informed such a key period on the history of the Kikuyu. This is what David Sandgren does in his study of Kikuyu religious activities in the 1930s-1950s. Sandgren posits that examining the religious divisions among the Kikuyu facilitates our understanding of the how they responded during a period of intense crisis. By the 1950s, there were three strands of Christianity in Kikuyu land that were in constant conflict. The first group consisted of the *kirore*, individuals who refused to leave the church during the circumcision crisis and those who went back after a few years away. The second group was the *Aregi*, or independent churches, such as the African Independent Churches and African Orthodox Churches, who left the missions during the circumcision crisis and were key participants in the 1920s and early 1930s reconciliation process mentioned previously. The final group was the *Arathi*, who rejected all things Western as well as significant aspects of culture.

Sandgren posits that during the *Mau Mau* protest, these internal divisions influenced which side the Kikuyu chose. The *Aregi* formed the bulk of those who participated in guerrilla warfare, while the *Kirore* joined the Home Guard militia and fought against the guerillas. The *Arathi* continued to exist in the fringes of the society while being ignored by both groups. He argues that this division was as a result of:
The explosion of ill feeling and the continuing antagonism among Aregi, Kirore and Arathi [which] made it difficult for any of these groups to identify with the concerns sponsored by another, regardless of how sympathetic they might be to the political issues themselves.\textsuperscript{187}

While not necessarily accounting for all the divisions within the movement, this assertion makes sense, since not all the Kikuyu joined the \textit{Mau Mau} movement, despite the fact that none of the Kikuyu escaped the challenges of the colonial system. This is because these religious divisions had also served to reinforce socio-economic inequities. Arguably then, the \textit{Mau Mau} insurrection was therefore a visible manifestation of the fundamental strain that inexorably accompanies cultural transformations in the face of socio-economic pressures.\textsuperscript{188} These divisions, having been intensified during the \textit{Mau Mau} conflict, were further engrained into the Kikuyu psyche. Tensions resulting from these divisions would become evident once again during another period of crisis in the post-independence period.

This chapter has examined the transformation of Kikuyu society under colonial rule. Despite the destabilization that resulted from unfavorable colonial policies of land alienation, forced labor, and taxation, the Kikuyu found ways to adapt to these conditions. They embraced Christianity in harmony with their indigenous worldview, and used it to cope. Even then, this adaptation did not follow a uniform pattern; rather, due to the inherent social inequities within Kikuyu society, the Kikuyu followed a fragmented pattern of conversion to Christianity. This led to the creation of a fragmented identity, which was formed along varying religious ideologies and was reinforced by socio-economic inequities. As will demonstrated in the following chapter, the divided identity

\textsuperscript{187} Sandgren, \textit{The Kikuyu and Christianity}, 157.

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.
would become part and parcel of Kikuyu cultural heritage even in the post-independence period. The following section examines how these internal tensions resulting from the said cultural fragmentation continues to impact Kikuyu political action in post-independence Kenya.
Chapter 4: Cultural Continuities and Discontinuities, Resistance and the *Mungiki*

This chapter focuses on the effects of a continued fragmented identity, shaped and articulated through competing religious ideologies, but solidified by socio-economic inequities. Through the study of the *Mungiki* movement, which emerged at the height of the socio-economic crisis of the 1980s, I argue that this fragmented identity is the most enduring cultural legacy upon the Kikuyu’s formal and informal politics. The chapter therefore examines *Mungiki*’s origins, leadership and religious traditions and practices, as they relate to the Kikuyu cultural background discussed in the previous chapters. I further posit that the even though *Mungiki* movement is an heir of multiple religious traditions, the most significant was *Arathi* religious traditions. This is because, as noted above, this religious tradition was popular among the disenfranchised Kikuyu during the colonial period. It is thus not surprising that as conditions deteriorated after independence, that the disenfranchised among the Kikuyu would continue to draw upon such traditions.

**Kenya after Independence**

For many Africans, the advent of independence brought hope for better times; a change in their social-economic status. Individuals looked forward to accessing resources that were previously unavailable to them. Indeed for a few years things looked great for these post-colonial African states. Nevertheless, the rapid economic growth that had been facilitated by the high prices that African exports such as cocoa, coffee, among others fetched in international market, came to a sudden halt in the face of the 1973 oil crisis.
Fred Cooper convincingly demonstrates that these oil crises had double effect on the externally oriented African economies: it increased their bills for fuel at a time when transport, agricultural machinery and fledgling industries were becoming more energy-intensive and fostered a recession in the industrialized world and lowered demand and prices for African agricultural and mineral products.\(^{189}\) With their states drowning in debt, African leaders were forced to ask for more money from international lenders. The money came with strings attached; Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). The subsequent implementation of SAPs further aggravated the economic crisis of these countries. They demanded massive employee retrenchment and major cuts on government funding on public services, and market liberalization.\(^{190}\) The result of these demands was: massive job losses, a sharp rise in the cost of living, and lack of public infrastructure in the form of hospitals, schools, and good roads, among others. Additionally, “the new states had to contend with the disjointed structures of underdeveloped economies inherited colonial lines, with production geared for export

\(^{189}\) Fred Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 86.

and with a very limited domestic market.”\textsuperscript{191} It goes without saying that these conditions caused intense human suffering for many Africans and Kenya was no exception.

For the Kikuyu, these conditions were further intensified by the isolationist policies that the then president Moi adopted in an attempt to solidify his position as the new president. Concerning Moi’s policies, Merilee Grindle writes the following:

Within months of his [Moi’s] election, the country faced severe economic problems. In seeking to redistribute resources and power to groups and regions that had been marginalized under the colonial and Kenyatta governments, Moi moved some members of his own and other minority groups into positions of power, and removed some close associates of Kenyatta. By so doing, he argued, the government was pursuing a political strategy of distributing state patronage, ethnic arithmetic, and regional political autonomy similar to that of Kenyatta before him. He was simply following Kenyatta’s footsteps and, establishing the Nyayo philosophy of peace love and unity.\textsuperscript{192}

In executing his political strategies, Moi further intensified the sufferings of the Kikuyu as a group, but even more so, those of the poor and landless. Those without wealth or clout within the Kikuyu society, primarily the youth, became the first victims of this crisis. Many left their rural homes in the central province and moved to Nairobi in search of a better life only to find themselves in deeper poverty. The hopelessness experienced by such individuals is aptly captured in the following sentiments:

I came to Nairobi to find a better life. I am not educated; I only got to class five and dropped out because my father could no longer pay my school fees. When I got to Nairobi, I went to live in Mathare slums where I started drinking, using drugs, and I even started selling them. I felt I had no choice. I had a lot of pain and had no hope. Without an education, or money there was no way forward.\textsuperscript{193}

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{193} Ngari Njogu, Interview by Author, January 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2012.
What this young man experienced greatly mirrored the experiences of other youths in Africa. Quite clearly it seemed like the youth were on their way to becoming a “lost generation.” Nonetheless, despite the challenges, these disenfranchised individuals did not stop searching for solutions to their problems. It is noteworthy that at the height of this socio-economic crisis, there were a marked increase number of religious movements in Africa. In fact in one case study, in less than ten years, there was more than 50% increase in the number of African independent churches in the urban areas in Mozambique. Was this merely a coincidence?

Resistance, covert or otherwise, is a significant component of many African religious movements like the Mungiki. There is a consensus among scholars that for a behavior to count as resistance, there needs to be an oppositional element and active behavior, whether physical, verbal, or cognitive, demonstrating this opposition. Thus, to determine whether or not members of a religious movement are engaging in political/resistance acts, James Scott’s concept of infrapolitics becomes particularly relevant in this discussion. Infrapolitics captures the idea of an “unobtrusive realm of political struggle…invisible by design—a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.” Scott contends that infrapolitics provides much of the cultural and structural underpinnings of the more visible political action. Subsequently, in the

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197 Scott, “The Infra Politics of the Subordinate groups,” 69, 71.
present study, resistance is any action, collective or individual, overt or covert, that seeks to demonstrate discontent with the status quo. This definition allows me to examine actions that might not be readily recognized as resistance in cases where overt resistance would be neither practical nor prudent. Additionally, it conveys the idea that Africans engage in a broad range of activities not only in reaction to external domination but also to forces within and without their communities. This is especially significant in the case of the Mungiki, whose contention is not only against external domination, but also against other segments of the Kikuyu ethnic group. Moreover, focusing on covert versus overt resistance facilitates our understanding of resistance strategies that employ symbolism drawn from religious traditions. As such, it makes sense that the youth, most of them disenfranchised would choose religious movements as a basis for their contentious politics. This chapter therefore details the rise of the Mungiki movement as an expression of discontent at status quo, through religious expressions based within specific cultural milieu.

The Birth of the Mungiki Movement

The Mungiki movement first came to the public attention in 1994 following the arrest of 63 members for allegedly participating in oathing activities to cause ethnic violence in Molo. The arrested men’s lawyer, Mirugi Kariuki, argued that his clients were being wrongfully accused because they were members of a church called Mungiki. The

198 Scott, Weapons of the Weak, xvi.


men were eventually found guilty of the charges and were jailed for two years.\textsuperscript{201} Two decades later, the movement has transformed from a little known “church” into an infamous movement. Despite its notoriety, it is noteworthy that most scholars do not agree on the exact origin of the movement. Some scholars attribute its origin to the 1992 ethnic clashes in the rift valley province,\textsuperscript{202} while others have attributed its genesis to the now defunct \textit{He Ma ya Ngai} movement led by Ngonya wa Gakonya in 1987.\textsuperscript{203} While these studies are quite useful in detailing who make up this movement they are not entirely successful in recounting how exactly the movement came. In this dissertation, I use oral narratives from longtime members of the movement to reconstruct its genesis. The significance of these interviews lies, not in their historical accuracy, but in revealing how members of the \textit{Mungiki} view themselves and their past as a group. Consequently, I argue that \textit{Mungiki} members’ perception of themselves shapes how they interact not only with each other but also with the larger society. Understanding their ideology and its cultural backgrounds enhances our appreciation of their actions as a group.

\textbf{Narrative of origin}

Long-time members of the \textit{Mungiki} credit the movement’s genesis to the divine calling of Maina Njenga, its founder. The following is an account of the events surrounding the birth of a movement as narrated to me by Ngari Njogu:

\textsuperscript{201} Gatheru wa Njohi, Interview by Author, February 02, 2012, Nairobi, Kenya. (Mr Njohi was among the accused).

\textsuperscript{202} Wamue, “Revisiting our Indigenous Shrines,” 454.

\textsuperscript{203} Kagwanja, “Facing Mount Kenya,” 33
In 1987, Njenga was sitting in a classroom when suddenly a white dove flew in and sat on his head. No matter how hard he tried to get rid of it, it would not budge. Abruptly, darkness filled the room and as a bright light shone on the blackboard, the following words appeared, “I have heard the suffering of my people, and I am sending you to liberate them. He would see and hear these words again in a dream compelling him to start preaching to his neighbors about the things he was hearing. Njenga dropped out of school unable to deal with what was happening to him. On December 4, 1987, Njenga underwent a life-changing ordeal that happened in his father’s home in Oraimutia village in Ol Joro Orok, Nyandarua district. Everyone thought he was going crazy, yet they could not help but feel something extra-ordinary was happening. Whatever he said came true. He started having visions and dreams. Nothing the parents did helped the situation. Then one evening, he told his mother that he would be going away on a journey. Of course his mother told him off saying that he needed a lot to sleep. Njenga went to sleep, and when he was in his thingira (a Kikuyu young man’s dwelling, usually separate from the main house) his mother locked him up. As soon as he was alone, the roof to his thingira opened up and a man who looked like an angel came in. The angel said to Njenga to accompany him or else he would die. So, Njenga went with the angel. The next day, when his mother came to check on him, he was found dead! Funeral arrangements began to be made. On the third day after his death, everybody gathered for the funeral.

Some claim that just as he was about to be buried, they saw a blinding light hit the coffin:

As everybody ran for their lives living the coffin by itself at the graveside, Maina rose from the dead. Njenga says that during his experienced, he travelled to heaven where he was told many things that would prepare him for his assignment. After the resurrection, his father refused to take him back home saying he wanted nothing to do with a possessed individual. As a result, Njenga lived in a nearby forest subsisting on nothing but wild berries and fruits. For several weeks, he was in the forest; he learned a lot of things about herbal medicine. Meanwhile, Njenga’s father began having problems. He was unable to have bowel movements. Three prophets came to him saying unless he accepted his son back then he would continue to have problems. Eventually, the father agreed to their directions and when Njenga returned, he slaughtered a young calf and as soon as he did so, the father’s problems disappeared. Afterwards Njenga started healing people using the herbal knowledge he had acquired. Soon everybody knew about him. Additionally, he continued telling people’s future and as a result, there were a lot of people curious about him. People began flocking to Njenga to be cured of illnesses or to be told about their future. Njenga soon joined his cousin Ndura Waruinge, who at this time was also experiencing supernatural dreams. As they got more and more popular, a neighbor, an elder, in an attempt to restrict access to

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them said, “Uhuro uyu ti wa *Mungiki*, (this business is not for the multitudes)” To which Maina said, “Asha, ni wa *Mungiki*, (Actually, it is for the masses).” Thus, the name *Mungiki* was born.\(^{206}\)

Whether or not these events occurred as narrated is not as significant as their centrality in *Mungiki*’s ideology. This was evident in the fact that almost all members interviewed gave me a version of this story. Njenga’s divine calling legitimized him as a powerful spiritual leader and also served to bind members to one another. As noted above, it is undeniable that intense socio-economic crises created conducive conditions for the rise of a movement such as this one. Yet, it is also true that not all societies undergoing such conditions develop movements of this nature. Nonetheless, the presence of a rich cultural tradition of religiously based movements within the Kikuyu society especially accessible to the young and disenfranchised made the *Mungiki* movement especially appealing. However, without a powerful leader to manipulate these cultural symbols, the movement might not have gathered as much momentum as it did.

\(^{206}\) Njoroge Kamunya, Interview by Billy Muiruri, February 2010, Nairobi, Kenya.
Mungiki’s Religious Leadership

I met Maina Njenga, the founder and spiritual leader of the Mungiki movement, on a Thursday afternoon in February of 2012, at his home in the Nairobi suburb of Karen. Courtesy of his close associates, we were scheduled to have an interview that day. When I arrived, I found him sitting in an unfinished wooden structure on his property with a few of his close associates. Around the compound were about forty young men, who were working doing various jobs: some were building a house; others were drawing water, while others were roasting meat. Njenga greeted me and said, “I knew you would come today, I saw you in my dreams, I knew you would be carrying a video camera.” His friends said to me, “this man is God’s prophet.” I nodded and thanked him for finding the time to meet me. Njenga then invited me to join in the communal eating of the roasted mbuzi (goat) that had just been brought in. After we ate, he asked what I wanted to know. I told him that I wanted to know what the Mungiki was and where it started. Njenga motioned one of the young men to come in and told him, “I want you to gather the others and tell them I said to tell this young lady all she wants to know.” About ten different young men came in and granted me an interview. When time came for me to interview Njenga, he said that he did not have time as he was on his way to his home village of Ol-Nga’rua, a few hundred kilometers from Nairobi. Nonetheless, he invited me to accompany him and his entourage on the trip, saying that I could not possibly learn anything important in a few minutes with just a pen and tape-recorder. “You need to come and see and experience where it all began,” he added. As a researcher, I was only too happy to accept the invitation, but given the movement’s reputation I was a little hesitant. I told him that I would like to follow him there the next day but that I did not
know my way there. This was to give me an opportunity to notify my family where I would be in case anything happened to me. That was when he turned to one of his followers who owned a taxi business and calmly said to him, “Listen to me, I need you to help this girl. If you help her things will go well with you, but if you refuse, things will not go well with you.” The man in question did not hesitate, and not only did he drop me off at my home that evening, but in the morning he and his friend picked me up to take me to Njenga’s home, the cradle of Mungiki.

As we drove to Nyahururu, I asked the men what they thought Njenga had meant by those words; were they scared of him? The driver, to whom those words had been directed said, “There are people in this world who have access to the spirit realm. God talks to them and he also listens to them. Usually when they say things like that, you better harness the blessings rather than the curses.” Nobody dared disobey what Njenga said. The other passenger told me that once, Njenga asked him to leave his business for a very long time to accompany Njenga in the preaching business. He complied with no questions asked. When I asked him if he had feared being broke, he responded, “Njenga found me without a cent in my pocket; he groomed me to be whom I am. He told me God would take care of us, and I believed him, and guess what, God did. So when he says, ‘leave your business and accompany me,’ who am I to say otherwise?”

When we got to Ol-Ng’arua, there were many young men waiting for Njenga. The majority lived on the compound helping to run the farm. Njenga was not present at the farmhouse when our vehicle arrived, but when he did appear, the atmosphere changed. There was an air of reverence and veneration around us, with everybody running to cater to him. It was around 7 p.m. when Njenga asked me and to go see the farm, and about
twenty young men accompanied us. We came to a house on the other extremity of the farm in which an older woman lived. She was one of the people who had been affected by the land clashes in Laikipia in 1992. Being the only other woman in the vicinity, I stepped outside the house to chat with her. She told me that Njenga had resettled her and her children on the farm, saying that he had been very kind to them. She lived on the farm and helped take care of it. She said she was not a member of the Mungiki, but she did not see anything wrong with it as it had supported her. She also said there were many young men on the farm that had been given a second chance thanks to Njenga. Even as she said these things, I could not help but feel she said these things because she dared not say otherwise. In time I was called back in the house. By now, it was about 9 p.m. and with some of the village leaders present, the house was full to capacity. For the next four hours, I asked my questions, and they questioned me. They were interested in who I was just as much as I was interested in them.

As we finished the conversation, Njenga said to me, “The Mungiki is dead. Just look at the tree in front of the house, that tree appeared when the movement begun. When the Mungiki ended, the tree died too.” As I was getting ready to live the house, a young woman entered the house; she was the young wife of one of Njenga’s close associate. She seemed to be troubled: she was foaming at the mouth, speaking incoherent words, uttering piercing shrieks—clearly suffering from some form of seizures. They said she was possessed and that there were plenty of demons in her that needed to be exorcised. Njenga called for some incense to perform some rites and prayers to heal her. I was invited to stay to observe the rites, but I declined. I left to find a place to sleep. I left the next day to return to Nairobi. I had never experienced such a thing. To observe Njenga’s
almost hypnotizing hold on his followers was beyond anything I had ever seen. Only one word, in my opinion, could describe the spellbinding hold that Njenga had on his people: charisma.

**Charismatic Leadership within Mungiki**

Few words invoke as much controversy as charisma. For some, charisma evokes positive images and thus should not be used to describe individuals who are known to have perpetrated negative acts. Yet, it is undeniable that there are some individuals who have had an unnatural hold on their followers, and thus an inordinate amount of power over them, which they harness for either good or bad. The other aspect of this controversy is aptly captured in the following words:

“Charisma” today is so sloppy that it is easy to despair to ever recall its roots in Weber. A generation of social and political scientists, journalists and media experts has somewhere along its educational career found out about charisma. Whatever it is they learned, charisma is what makes leaders. Popes and presidents are elected because of their “charisma”. A football player or musician who does not have charisma won’t make it to stardom. Favorite ministers and professors are said to have charisma, and in some bureaucratic churches, there is an active “charismatic movement”. Some sociologists have even suggested that corporations and their products their “names” have.

It is not surprising, therefore, that attempts to define and use this concept are often accompanied by confusion and even frustration. Even then, in my opinion, it still remains the most expedient way to define the magnetic ability of some people to inspire and influence others. Thus, it becomes imperative to detangle the concept from the web of

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analysis and transformations that the term has undergone. Why is this important? Post-independence Africa has seen no shortage of religiously inspired protest movements with magnetic leaders. Alice Lakwena’s and the Holy Spirit movement in Uganda, the Maitatsine’s movement in Niger, and Elijah Masinde with his *Dini ya Msambwa* establish this fact. Yet, few studies of these movements in Africa, if any, have analyzed the relationship between the leaders and followers of these movements and how this relationship impacts the nature of the movements and their relationships with those on the outside.

I contend that to ignore this type of leadership is to miss a big piece of the puzzle. As noted in the previous chapters, central to the rise of a religious movement is cultural tension within a society, coupled with crisis. Yet, those two elements alone do not create a movement. There is a need for a leader who harnesses these cultural tensions to inspire individuals during a time of crisis. More than just inspiring the rise of protest movements, the nature of leadership also determines the type of resistance strategies employed and the longevity of the movement. Indeed, to understand the psyche behind the actions of these groups, it is imperative that we understand the relationship between leaders and followers. However, by grounding this analysis within the cultural realm we avoid denying the followers agency in this relationship. This is especially relevant in the face of rising acts of violence allegedly perpetrated by members of these movements.

The concept of charisma in itself is not new. The very etymology of the word demonstrates its ancient roots. The word charisma is derived from the Greek goddess Charis, who personified grace, beauty, purity, and altruism. Possession of these gifts
became known as charisma. Modern usages however, have its roots in Marx Weber’s works. He defines charisma as, “a certain quality of an individual’s personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” Yet this deceptively straightforward definition of charisma has led to intense scholarly debates on what constitutes charisma. On the one hand there are some of Weber’s successors who have applied the term in an entirely reductionist way. In this group are those who highlight on the role of charismatic leadership during stability arguing for its importance to a routinized, hierarchical social order. In a brilliant analysis, Philip Smith contends that the result of this approach has been to convert charisma into a “seemingly automatic appendage of office or status, [with the tendency to] conflate the exercise of routine power with a ‘world ordering symbolic power’. Smith further opines that this has resulted in their focusing extensively on the form that social structures can take in supporting a psychologically defined charisma at the expense of the cultures that support social structures. On the other end of this reductionist spectrum are scholars who seek to bolster Weber’s claim regarding the association of charismatic leadership with


212 Ibid., 102.
instability rather than stability. As Edward Shils contends, these scholars have “taken to testify to the irrepressibility of the need to attribute charismatic properties to individuals under certain conditions, and to the probability that certain kinds of personality-expansive and dominating and with strong and fundamental convictions-will emerge under conditions of stress, in specific decision making, power exercising roles.” Even as they link charisma with phenomena such as social movements and the emergence of new states, these scholars have bound charisma so tightly to the social structure that “cultural autonomy has been squeezed out of the analytic frame.” Smith further posits that when mythology and symbolism are discussed, they are framed as an imaginative response to objective social relationships, such as inequality or social dislocation. Even theorists concerned with the relationship of charisma to the personality system neglect the influence of cultural forces on private meanings.

Smith notes that on the other hand there are those who have broadened the application of charisma so much so that it has lost its distinctiveness and, with it, its utility. It is noteworthy that central to Weber’s original definition are the sacred qualities of an individual and the sense of mission and duty that defines the relationship between the individual leader and his or her followers. Thus, the main validation of one’s charisma is, “the recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for


Smith, “Culture and Charisma,”103.
the validity of charisma.”216 From this description, charismatic leadership is not solely
determined by the individual qualities of a person claiming extra-ordinariness; he has to
have an audience that perceives him as such. Moreover, rather than just employing the
term charisma to the personal attributes of an individual, as important as these are, this
charisma has to be closely tied to wider symbolic and narrative fields, bringing in the
cultural element.217 Thus, the Weberian definition of charisma embodies both
psychological and sociological elements all operating within a cultural framework.

Smith fashions a model that I find quite useful in analyzing charisma within
movements such as the Mungiki. Central to his argument is the idea of a cultural basis for
charisma, linking it to “the quest for salvation and issues of purity, sacrality, profanity
and pollution,” as specified in Weber’s original arguments. In other words, charismatic
leaders invoke salvation narratives from whatever evils the target group is facing.
Charisma does not exist in a cultural vacuum. He contends that the salvation narrative is
key to emergence of charismatic leadership, especially where strong binaries of good and
evil exist. He further posits that in such cases, the charismatic leader will attain his or her
greatest force when images of evil are at their most threatening. Thus, when these cultural
frames are established then charismatic leadership comes to life.218 Nonetheless, it is
necessary to recognize that notions of good or evil vary from community to community.

Accordingly, the researcher’s duty becomes to specify the presence of codes and
narratives with formal and internally consistent systems of signification. This allows the

216 Ibid., 49.
218 Ibid., 105.
cultural system relative autonomy from the social and psychological systems, which, while useful, do not tell the entire story concerning charismatically led movements. An additional advantage to using this model is that while it emphasizes the importance of the individual leader, it maintains a strongly cultural, and therefore collectivist, rather than psychological and individualist, understanding of charisma.219

Nonetheless, Smith’s definition of charisma seems to imply that people’s need for leadership in times of crisis is the basis of charismatic leadership, and that this leadership wanes when the symbol of evil is no longer threatening. The unfortunate result of this argument is that it becomes difficult to distinguish between a popular and capable non-charismatic leader, and a charismatic one. Consequently, I posit that one way to distinguish between these two types of leadership is to highlight the sacral nature of charisma as highlighted in Weber’s original ideas. According to Weber, followers of a truly charismatic leader need to believe in the otherworldly powers or gifts of their leader. I argue that therein lays the distinction between a popular leader and a charismatic leader. Just because an individual invokes cultural imagery and moves individuals to have strong feelings towards him does not necessarily make him charismatic.

Therefore, the role of prophetic utterances and the belief of his followers that the leader possesses special gifts become important. A successful charismatic leader is one who is able to manipulate cultural narratives while at the same time continues convincing his followers to be divinely inspired, or, in Weber’s words, “an individual…endowed

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219 Ibid.

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with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. Indeed without enchantment, genuine charisma is impossible. Thus, while a symbol of evil is necessary in the rise of a charismatic leader, enchantment based deep within the cultural milieu of the target audience allows for this charismatic relationship long after the crisis is gone. It is not surprising, therefore, that the most successful charismatic leadership derives its legitimacy from the.

A good example of the mobilization of cultural ideas of evil is the Sudanese Mahdi in the late 1880s. The Mahdist rebellion against the British-controlled Turco-Egyptian administration occurred during a period of intense socio-economic upheaval. Mohammad Ahmad emerged as a unifier of different factions of the Sudanese and led a rebellion against the Turco-Egyptians. By invoking the Mahdist concept, which was rooted in the Shiite tradition of renewal, Mohammad quickly legitimized his position as leader. The Mahdi also employed the salvation narrative in getting people to follow him. He cast the Turco-Egyptian government as the symbol of evil and the cause of all the problems the Sudanese were experiencing. Perhaps nowhere do we see a stronger direct invocation of the salvation narrative than in the following declaration by the Mahdi himself:

If you have no better example to follow than that of the Turks it is not sufficient for you; for God has granted them wealth, long life and good health, but instead to accepting this from Him as a gift, they entirely forget themselves, and consider themselves to be the sole possessors of the world, they disobey the laws of the

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Prophet and God’s messengers. God has waited for them to return to Him, but in vain. At length he has destroyed them, has taken their dominions and handed them over to you... Turks used to put your men in prison, bound with chains, used to capture your women and children, and kill people, which is against the law of God. They had neither pity on your little children, nor respect for your old people. It is a wonder to me how can forget this, and why you do not join in fighting against them. They oppressed you greatly, yet you obeyed their orders. God has now sent me as your savior; join me therefore in my holy war against them, and their bodies shall be burnt with fire, and they shall be slain even to the last man.  

From the above proclamation, it is evident that the *Mahdi* was well aware of how short the Turco-Egyptian government had fallen in fulfilling its responsibility as God’s representative. Rather than look after their subjects, fellow Muslims, the Turks had used their position to abuse them. In essence, the Turks embodied evil that needed to be removed from the Sudan. As the foretold restorer, Mohammad positioned himself as the savior of the Sudanese from the clutches of the Turco-Egyptian forces and their associates, the British. The *Mahdi’s* emphasis upon this point clearly played on the feeling of resentment that many Sudanese who had suffered under the *Turkiyya* must have felt. This appeal must have worked effectively, as the movement quickly grew in leaps and bounds.

The idea of charismatic leadership was by no means restricted to the colonial period. The post-colonial period in Africa has also seen its share of individuals whose leadership of movements would qualify as charismatic. The Holy Spirit Movement (HSM), led by a young woman called Alice Lakwena, comes to mind. Lakwena was an

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effective charismatic leader because her followers believed that she was truly imbued with supernatural powers. Even more important was the fact that she harnessed the power of Acholi cultural idioms to address the current situation. Within the Acholi worldview, like in many Sub-Saharan societies, it is not possible to divorce the spiritual world from the material world. Uganda was undergoing a period of intense socio-economic and political turmoil. The Acholi in Northern Uganda viewed what was happening in the material world as a manifestation of the proceedings in the spiritual world.\textsuperscript{223} Lakwena positioned herself as a deliverer of the people from the vagaries of evil spirits that had been plaguing their community as a result of the arbitrary murders committed by soldiers. The presence of unclean soldiers caused the spread of misfortunes. These misfortunes manifested themselves in the form of AIDS, economic hardships, death, and neglect by those in power. In doing so, people saw in HSM a way out of material, ideological, and even political oppression, or at least a means of coping with the different challenges they faced. Lakwena performed rites that revealed to these soldiers of past misdeeds exactly what to do to keep clean. Most of the time it involved taking up weapons and ridding the land of “evil doers.”\textsuperscript{224} In this case, it makes sense that a young woman of no political or economic clout like Lakwena could command the almost worshipful attention of thousands of men.

Similarly, Njenga was also able to harness the cultural narrative of salvation from the evils of westernization, create a deep sense of pride in being a Kikuyu youth, and provide a mission for his followers. He told his followers that they had to adhere to all the

\textsuperscript{223} Allen, “Understanding Alice,” 385.

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid.
set principles so that they could transform themselves into channels that God could use to restore order on earth. One of Njenga’s associates said the following:

We are god’s instruments on earth, we have moved beyond the realm of Kikuyu culture and are now concerned with spreading this message to other ethnicities, and before you know it, we will reach the whole world. In fact Maina is going to the United States embassy to get his visa to travel to preach his message. We will eventually influence the whole world.²²⁵

Thus, even though the Kikuyu are no longer experiencing unique socio-economic crisis, Njenga continues to be relevant to his people by means of prophecy and by setting progressive spiritual goals for his followers. His people have faith in him because they believe he has a divine gift and calling. But is there justification for calling this type of leadership charismatic? First, let us examine what conditions might have given rise to a charismatic leader among the Kikuyu, and whether this fits with Smith’s framework.

As noted in the previous section, the socio-economic crisis of the 1980s brought to the fore underlying cultural tensions among the Kikuyu. While scholars have often connected the rise of Mungiki to immediate socio-economic crisis such as land shortages, it is noteworthy that Njenga never alluded to these problems. In fact, Njenga was never directly involved in politics at the birth of his movement. His key message was that Kikuyu youth were being misled and were trapped in mental slavery by paying attention to the foreign cultures and agents of those cultures among the Kikuyu.

It is significant that Njenga chose westernization as the symbol of evil. Even though president Moi was known to subjugate the Kikuyu, in Njenga’s opinion, it was only because they had forgotten their way of being, that other ethnicities were dominating.

²²⁵ Njoroge Wanjohi, Interview by Author, January 16th, 2012. Njenga never left for the United States, my suspicion is that the United States Embassy denied him the visa.
them. Thus, the source of evil was westernization, which, incidentally, began during colonialism. By referring to westernization, Njenga was drawing upon a larger narrative of resistance that the Kikuyu were familiar with. The target audience was familiar with the impact of colonialism on their society. Since the colonial period, the Kikuyu society had become divided along religious lines, with agents of foreign Christianity being those who descended from the *Aregi* and *Kirore* and the poor belonging to the spirit churches. His target audience understood who the real symbols of evil were: powerful Kikuyu leaders. One informant had the following to say about Kikuyu leaders:

> These powerful Kikuyu know that we are a threat. They have taken up all resources, and they do not want the poor Kikuyu to stop using drugs and alcohol because they will become aware of what these leaders are doing. That is why they have been out to get us. But we will not let them intimidate us.\(^{226}\)

The above statement represents captures the sentiments of many of those interview. It is clear that these young people were buying into Njenga’s rhetoric. In essence, Njenga was suggesting that westernization was a threat to the poor Kikuyu in the same way that colonialism had been years before. Through prophecy, Njenga positioned himself as a savior who would deliver the underprivileged Kikuyu from the crisis they were facing. By invoking the words, “I have had the cry of my people, go save them,” Njenga was establishing himself as the biblical figure Moses who was charged with delivering the sons of Israel from the Egyptians. In this case, the Kikuyu were the sons of Israel, and westernization and its various agents in the form of elite Kikuyu leaders, mainstream Kikuyu churches, and other bureaucratic entities, was Egypt. Njenga was successful because he clearly understood the power of cultural symbols in the minds of the

\(^{226}\)John Gacheru, Interview by Author, February 2\(^{nd}\), 2012.
disenfranchised. The following section examines the cultural background to Mungiki’s ideology.

**Cultural background to Mungiki Ideology**

Members of the Mungiki looked back to their cultural heritage to find an explanation for their troubles. They asserted that if Kikuyu people returned to their roots, then they would emerge from their subordinate position in relation to other ethnicities. Many scholars have used this assertion to label the Mungiki as either nativist or neo-traditionalist. Nonetheless, a close look at how the Mungiki interpreted what they perceived to be their indigenous customs reveals a more complex picture. Rather than going back to a mythical pre-colonial past, the Mungiki drew upon a rich cultural heritage that included Kikuyu encounters with Christianity. For instance, one informant had the following to say about why he joined the movement:

> Back in the old days, when we prayed to our God, he heard us. Whenever we prayed to ask for rain, it came. Whatever calamity there was, we prayed and God heard us. But, nowadays, look at how chaotic things have become? God no longer listens to us. So, I began searching for a place where God was speaking to his people. I would go to different churches to hear God speak and see him in action, but I never did. It was not until I found them (the Mungiki) that I believed again that God speaks to his people.

This idea of the absence of God along with the impotency of mainstream churches in times of crisis was echoed by several of my informants. For these young men, religion was supposed to help them cope with challenges. However, mainstream churches of the

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228 Gachoka, Interview by Author, January 26th, 2012.
*Kirore* and *Aregi* had failed them. They were still languishing in poverty despite the fact that they went to church. Thus, it was not about Christianity as a whole failing them, but about the one brand that seemed to unable to help them deal with increased socio-inequities. The increase in the numbers of new religious movements in Africa, despite the presence of mainstream churches, demonstrates this.229

Moreover, upon further examination, the young man’s statement demonstrates that the Kikuyu’s view of the pre-colonial past had been significantly altered by the Christian traditions present in Kikuyu land. In this particular case, the revivalist strand of Kikuyu Christianities evidently affected *Mungiki*’s idea of God. This is because the Kikuyu in pre-colonial times believed that God was too remote and was not to be bothered with personal issues, and he definitely did not speak to young people.230

Ironically, mission Christianity and later independent churches further reinforced the idea of God’s remoteness, as he did not directly speak to his people.231 The *Arathi*, on the other hand, claimed to have dreams and have direct communications with God. This appealed to these disenfranchised individuals in times of crisis; they needed to know that God was listening when they prayed. As such, when Gachoka, mentioned above, went to various Kikuyu churches probably those of the *Kirore* and *Aregi*, he did not find the answers he was looking for. Mainstream churches were proving to be impotent in times of crisis for many would-be members of *Mungiki*. To make things worse, members of these mainstream churches also made up the ruling elite that was apparently the source of


economic pressures experienced by these young men. One member of the Mungiki aptly captures this sentiment in the following statement:

We wanted to ensure people changed their lives by preaching the gospel. This way people would be mentally alert to realize what powerful Kikuyus were doing. They want to continue being in power and when they leave, their kids come in. They are afraid of us, the children of Mau Mau, we who never received the benefits of independence. By turning to God, we will become powerful.\footnote{Njogu, Interview by Author, February 12th, 2012.}

During the colonial period, the indigenous cultural framework expanded with the inclusion of Christian thought, which was then Africanized to fit the needs of the Kikuyu. Even concepts that did not overtly embrace Christianity became expressed through Christian idioms. Indeed, others felt that the only way true Kikuyuness would survive the vagaries of colonialism would be through embracing the potent portions of the Christianity.\footnote{Ng’ondu wa Kabuitu, “Preserving Kikuyu Characteristics,” \textit{August} 1929 p. 15, DC/MKS. 10B/13/1, KNA.} The Mungiki movement was born in a society whose collective psyche was divided along doctrinal lines. Its members would have to draw upon the religious traditions that would be more accessible and appealing to them. Since they were marginalized members of the society, it makes sense that they would find the Arathi traditions relevant. This becomes especially evident upon examining some of the key tenets of Mungiki ideology, such as thahu (observing ritual cleanliness) and urathi (the role of prophecy), which evidently mirror the Arathi traditions more closely than they do pre-colonial Kikuyu belief systems. This is not to suggest that the Mungiki movement is a reincarnation of the 1930s revivalist movements. On the contrary it demonstrates that Mungiki movement was based on live cultural systems, rather than on a wishful longing
for a mythical past.

Key Tenets of *Mungiki* Ideology

1. *Thahu*

Even though it is impossible to hear a member of the *Mungiki* mention *thahu* without the mention of the related concepts of *Kirumi* (curses) and *Migiro* (taboos), the later tenets are not pervasive as the notion of *thahu*. Among the pre-colonial Kikuyu, the observance of *thahu* was fundamental in protecting one against the wrath of ancestors. In the event that any Kikuyu unwittingly became unclean, he or she went to all lengths to ensure he or she recovered from this state. As discussed in the previous chapter, the idea of *thahu* exerted a considerable influence on the Kikuyu. Thus, it is understandable that this belief would continue to transform in order to meet the needs of the Kikuyu. During the colonial period, Kikuyu Christians, borrowing from Christianity, expanded the inventory of things that made one unclean. An examination of a few examples in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial societies demonstrates the flexible and dynamic nature of cultural symbols that support religiously based movements.

In pre-colonial Kikuyu society, it was impossible to escape *thahu*: if food was eaten from a cracked pot, the people eating it became *thahu*, and a *mundu mugo* (medicine man) had to be called in for ritual cleansing. Moreover, if a person touched menstrual blood, he or she was *thahu*, and if a man cohabited with a woman in this state, they were *thahu* and had to be purified.\(^{234}\) The purification varied according to the nature

\(^{234}\) Hobley, “British East Africa: Kikuyu Customs and Beliefs,” 430-434.
of transgression. During the colonial period, the Arathi Christians are a good example of how the concept of thahu transformed to match the socio-historical context. For the Arathi, if anyone came into contact with a dead body, he or she was to stay separate from the company of other people and cleanse himself on the first, third, and seventh days.\(^\text{235}\) This was similar to the Levitical law that stated that anyone who came into contact with a corpse would be ritually unclean until the seventh day.\(^\text{236}\) No doubt the Arathi Christians found common ground between the Levitical law and their own cultural backgrounds. The big difference between the pre-colonial observances of thahu and the Arathi Christian observance were the object of the ritual cleanliness. Rather than being unclean in the sight of ancestral spirits, the Arathi became unclean in relation to God. As such, they were quick to reject the slaughtering lambs that were mostly used in the indigenous cleansing ceremonies.\(^\text{237}\)

In the observance of thahu, the Mungiki considered dead bodies unclean too, but so were cigarettes, alcohol, promiscuity, and illegal drugs. They also believed that one was unclean until he or she was cleansed. Therefore, all new members had to undergo cleansing ceremonies. On the importance of observing thahu, one member said the following, “If you want to join, you should have stopped drinking alcohol, be married to one or two or three wives, stopped using drugs, and also theft. In short we want a clean person. One is bathed in special oil, miinu (a special blend of herbs) and coarse salt and


\(^\text{236}\) Numbers 19: 11-12, 16 (The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures).

water.” At this point, it is important to point out that just like the *Arathi*, the *Mungiki* related the attainment of *thahu* to God. Anyone who transgressed the rules of cleanliness was unfit to pray to God. This demonstrates that rather than recalling their pre-colonial indigenous pasts, the *Mungiki* were drawing upon the more recent *Arathi* cultural heritage.

The *Mungiki* felt that Kikuyu youth had lost direction and were in dire need of guidance. They viewed items like alcohol and illegal drugs symbolic evils. They argued that these things had blinded Kikuyu minds, causing them to fall prey to “mental slavery.” In his own interpretation of Njenga’s divine calling, one young man stated, “this is why God spoke to Maina Njenga asking him what he would do with all the young men who were getting lost drinking, using marijuana and prostituting themselves.” Thus, by observing the time-honored concept of *thahu*, the *Mungiki* felt they would be successful in rescuing poor Kikuyus. Without fail, every interview subject in this research expressed his satisfaction with the quality of his following conversion. As one informant stated, “I no longer drink, smoke, or engage in reckless sexual behavior. I am married and I have a happy home. I strive every day to live a clean life because I know it is the best way to be and God hears us as a result. You know our bodies are the temple of God and he wants us to be clean.” In drawing on their *Arathi* cultural heritage, the poor Kikuyu were able to find answers to their immediate problems.

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238 Gatheru wa Wanjohi, Interview by Author, February 2nd, 2012.

239 Ibid.

240 Joram Kamaru, Interview by Author, January 24th, 2012.

The Role of Prophecy

Another important facet of the Mungiki movement that demonstrates their links with the Arathi tradition is the idea of prophecy. The ideas of prophets and prophecy are not without their complications, as who exactly is or becomes one varies from society to society. This challenge is further compounded by the presence of individuals such as “diviners,” “ritual experts,” “witch-doctors,” oracles, and spirit mediums who are difficult to distinguish from prophets. It thus becomes essential to examine the existence of individuals who claim prophet-hood within their own cultural context. As Johnson and Anderson suggest, before using the term prophet, we must first define what the word means both to the one claiming the title and to his or her followers. I thus adopt the definition of prophet as an inspired individual whose concern goes into the wider moral community (in this case, community can extend across political boundaries and does not have to be bound by kinship, language, ethnicity, or even territory at a social or political level, and who receives legitimacy through engaging in a dialogue with his or her audience).

One of the most renowned Kikuyu prophets, Mugo wa Kabiru, is credited with having foretold the arrival of the Europeans. Nonetheless, while the idea of prophecy and prophets among the Kikuyu was not new, the concept of young prophets was quite rare. Only older men received communications from God. However, in the more recent

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243 Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, 41-44.
tradition of the *Arathi*, people of all ages, and young people especially, were known to receive dreams and callings to special purposes in the fashion of Joseph Ng’ang’a, founder of the *Arathi* movement. It is no surprise, therefore, that followers of Maina Njenga were quite willing to accept him as a prophet. About Njenga’s calling, one informant had this to say:

Our young men were unable to do anything constructive because they were drunk and too preoccupied with mundane things. Meanwhile, other people continued to prosper. It was time to awaken the youth from this stupor that they were in. This is why he was sent. He would go to churches to preach about the gospel, asking people to change their ways and follow God. He used to enter into churches to preach but the pastors told him that if someone is not sick they do not need a doctor. Therefore those people in church who say they are saved. They know God and are therefore not the ones he had been sent to. He had been sent to those who did not know God at all, so that they are able to know God. It became necessary for him to form a church…he had to find people like us…he started finding two, or three and soon they spread. At that time we believed if you have a calling you should not ignore it.²⁴⁴

In his followers’ eyes, Maina was a prophet because he fulfilled several conditions: he was called by divine inspiration, his experience of death and resurrection was no ordinary event, he was imbued with the power of foreknowledge or commonly unknown information, and, finally, he bore a message to rally the Kikuyu youth out of a period of crisis.²⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Maina’s legitimacy came not only from his inspired expression, but also from the fact that his claim of prophecy was not made out of a cultural vacuum. This concept of prophecy had deep roots in Kikuyu cultural heritage.

Among the indigenous Kikuyu, a *murathi* (prophet), or one who was considered a prophet, required no magic to interpret his message or instructions given to him by God.

²⁴⁴ Njogu, Interview by Author, January 16th, 2012.

He was in direct communication with God through dreams or visions.\textsuperscript{246} This was distinct from a \textit{mundo mugo}, or diviner, who employed different medicines or arts of divination to discern things. As noted in the second chapter, circumcision and other cleansing rites were overseen by a \textit{mundo mugo}. An example of an indigenous \textit{murathi} and his function is captured in Hobley’s interview with one such individual in 1911. This individual reported that twice a year, during the night he fell into a deeper sleep than usual, a trance. While in this condition, he would be taken bodily out of his bed and hear a voice telling him things, but he would never see who gave him the message. The interior of the hut always appeared to him to be lighted up, and the message came with a booming sound, which he understood. He further stated that his trances were usually so exhausting that for three days after the ordeal he was unable to rise from his bed. In harmony with Kenyatta’s argument, this man claimed that his powers did not hinge on anything physical, but rather they came from God himself, especially during crisis.\textsuperscript{247}

Njenga’s experience both mirrors and differs from Hobley’s informant in several important ways. First, Njenga did not have to do anything to receive his calling. Secondly, Njenga’s calling came during a time of socio-economic and cultural crisis among the Kikuyu. Third, the man in Hobley’s case was an older man. Yet, the prophet in the early twentieth century never claimed that he had died and had been resurrected. This particular element seems to be borrowed from Christian heritage. Njenga’s death

\textsuperscript{246} Murray, “Kikuyu Spirit Churches,” 224.

and subsequent resurrection on the third day seems to closely mirror Jesus Christ’s experience recorded in the Bible.\textsuperscript{248}

Additionally, Njenga relied upon divine appointment for legitimacy in a society that put much emphasis on age and economic prosperity. This was not new among the Kikuyu. In the 1920s, the \textit{Arathi} Christians encountered a similar challenge. As noted earlier, the \textit{Arathi} were primarily young men in their twenties wishing to establish their niche in a world that was quite gerontocratic. They thus turned to the spirit world for acceptance. Nonetheless, even within the spiritual realm, the elders held sway, as they were charged with the responsibility of representing the community in religious matters. It is not surprising, therefore, that the \textit{Arathi} Christians found within the Christian rhetoric an alternative source of legitimacy. In fact, their favorite text in the Bible was about young men prophesying. The verse states:

\begin{quote}
In the last days…I will pour my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams; yea and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my spirit; and they shall prophesy.\textsuperscript{249}
\end{quote}

It is even more informing that the Kikuyu word translated as “prophesy” in the Kikuyu bible was \textit{ratha}, the very root of the \textit{Arathi} name. This same word was used to identify prophets in the indigenous society. It must have reminded them that they were now possessors of a gift that was previously unattainable to them.\textsuperscript{250} Njenga’s ability to

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\textsuperscript{250} Murray, “Kikuyu Spirit churches,” 225, 226.
\end{flushright}
foretell future events gave him legitimacy in the eyes of his followers. One such comment from one of his followers illustrates this point:

Chairman is an awe-inspiring person. He can tell you what will happen tomorrow, and also he can tell you what will happen tomorrow. Should he also wish, he can appear right here. Chairman would come and tell us prophecies and after two or three days, they would be fulfilled. I remember when I was in Kamiti maximum-security prison. I was in there for trumped up charges of robbery, because I was a Mungiki member. He came and told me, do not worry, you will get out, as long us you pray and repent of your sin. I asked him, “how about all of these trumped up charges?” he reassured me saying I should not worry, as they would all go away. Sure enough a short while later I was released. That is why we have a lot of faith in him. He never disappoints us.  

Njenga’s followers had faith in him because of his ability to foretell the future. To them, this ability proved divine approval. Another informant said the following, “Maina Njenga told us about the new constitution long before it came to pass. He told us about the Hague trials many years before hand. How can you not believe that such a person is from God?”

Njenga’s claims of prophesy resonated with the Kikuyu youth who were not only familiar with the concept but also felt that it empowered them. It is evident that Njenga’s prophetic abilities were paramount to his followers’ sense of security and direction. They followed him because they believed God inspired him; otherwise, he would not be able to foretell the future accurately. Contrary to what O’Brien describes, these youths were far from being helpless, unable to make “effective” opposition, and at the mercy of

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251 Daniel Kamau, Interview by Author, January 24th, 2012.

252 Njogu, Interview by Author, January 16th, 2012.
Despite being economically and socially marginalized, these youths found within their cultural heritage a source of empowerment.

Njenga never missed an opportunity to demonstrate his abilities. For example, on the day that I met him for a personal interview, he told me that the previous night he had seen a young woman in his dream carrying a video camera. He also said that as soon as I walked in, he knew that I was the woman from his dreams. Nonetheless, it seems he forgot his dream because two days later when I met him for a follow-up interview, he said that two Akurinu (members of the spirit churches, part of the Arathi movement) prophets had told him that a young woman called Wanjiru, which happens to be my name, would come to visit him. He thus attributed his knowledge of my arrival not to his dreams but to the Akurinu prophets. Nonetheless, despite the discrepancies, it was evident that his followers who were present were pretty impressed by their leader’s powers. Quite clearly, Njenga was an effective leader, drawing from the existing cultural legacy.

The rise of the Mungiki movement in the late 1980s demonstrated the diverse religious heritage available to the Kikuyu. Subconsciously different individuals within the community drew upon whichever cultural legacy they found attractive. For many poor young people, this would be the Arathi legacy. For the wealthier ones, the Kirore and Aregi legacies were more appealing. More often than not, these competing ideologies resulted in tensions. Perhaps this is why it is impossible to discuss the Mungiki movement without addressing the question of violence. The Mungiki, just like the Arathi, continues

to stand in an antagonistic relationship with the larger Kikuyu society. Consequently, over the last two decades, the *Mungiki* has been accused of perpetrating gruesome acts of violence. The following chapter explains these allegations by examining internal tensions within the movement, as a result of leadership squabbles and how this relates to the latent conflict within the Kikuyu society at large.
Chapter 5: *Mungiki*, Leadership, and Violence

“Might Drink Your Blood but otherwise not Bad Guys!” read a headline in the June 22nd, 2007 edition of the New York Times. Another July 2007 Reuters’ article had this to say, “Locked in a war with Kenya's police, the *Mungiki* criminal gang has already spread enough fear and violence to have made its name the word that is not spoken aloud in Kenya's fertile highlands.” News stories like these are not unique; both local and international news outlets abound with narrations of the gruesome acts of violence allegedly perpetrated by the *Mungiki*. As a result, the *Mungiki* movement has grown larger than life, shrouded with mystery and viewed with suspicion and fear. The mistrust and terror accompanying the mention of the *Mungiki* is not in the least unjustified. Within the past two decades, the group has been accused of murder, extortion, and forced genital cuttings for women, among other crimes.\(^{254}\) While I personally did not gather any evidence of violence as I interacted with them for a couple of months, I cannot fully discount these allegations.

That said, the reality of the matter is, violence is quite commonly associated with religious movements like the Mungiki. Although many members categorically denied participating in acts of senseless violence, how might we understand the relationship between religious movements and violence? Anderson suggests that the Mungiki uses violence as a means of control further adding that, “in the denial of the state as the guarantor of social order, vigilantism will invoke an “imagined order” that either existed in the past… or never existed but is desired.” This explanation only caters to the material aspect of the movement, which my fieldwork reveals is, but one aspect of the Mungiki movement. Only a small number of Mungiki members actually benefitted from the projects that required control of the public sphere. Other members who were financially independent would therefore have no motivation to participate in activities that would endanger their lives. This chapter goes beyond the idea of control for material benefits and examines violence associated with the Mungiki in light of ideology, and internal tensions within the movement itself, as a result of leadership squabbles and highlights the divisions within the Kikuyu society.

**Violence and Religious Movements**

The relationship between religion and violence has been the subject of recent sociological studies spreading across a diverse range of cultural groups and traditions, not just in Africa but also around the globe. Yet, there is need to distinguish between different forms of violence. David Bromley and J. Gordon Melton provide a useful point of departure in understanding violence associated with religious movements. First, they

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treat violence as “relational and processual rather than as simply social action,” adding that violent acts surrounding religious movements are best viewed as “the product of an interactive sequence of movement-societal exchanges, and these qualities mean that ultimate outcomes remain contingent through interactive sequence.” They thus distinguish violence variously, stating:

Violence is variously conceptualized as an act, a process, or a relationship. Violence may involve individual actions, as in the personal murder of one member of a religious group by another, an outsider by an insider or an insider by an outsider. It may also involve collective action by or against a group, as in the cases of war, revolution, repression, and terrorism. Violence may or may not explicitly invoke religious objectives. For example an individual who is a member of a religious group may simply be the perpetrator or victim of an act of violence, with no connection to a religious purpose, or violent acts may have a specific religious goal, such as assassination of a spiritual leader or execution for heresy. Violence may occur within the confines of a group, as in the case of schismatic conflict; it may also occur across institutional boundaries, as when the religious group is the target of political repression or the instigator of an attack against societal institutions.

The above scenarios apply to various religious movements in Africa throughout modern history. For instance, in the Holy Spirit Movement case, the violence perpetrated was collective violence against President Yoweri Museveni’s armies, and vice versa. In recent times, we have seen Islamic fundamentalist groups instigating violence against Western countries and institutions, the most infamous case being the twin tower bombings on September 11, 2011. In Kenya, there have been multiple cases of violent acts against

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257 Ibid.
civilians by members of the Somali based Islamic militant group Al-Shabaab. For the Mungiki there are several applicable scenarios. The first probable probability is violence by or against members of the Mungiki without any religious objectives. The second scenario is violence with a very specific religious goal, and the third is violence as a result of both factions within the movement and targeted attacks by the state. The following section examines how violence associated with the Mungiki is a manifestation of internal conflicts within the Kikuyu society. One instance where this hostility is evident is in Mungiki’s interactions with mainstream Kikuyu churches.

The Mungiki and Kikuyu Mainstream Churches

As discussed above, it is evident that the Mungiki movement was simply not a neo-traditionalist movement that sought to return the Kikuyu to some mythical cultural past. Rather, it was a manifestation of the inherent divisions among the Kikuyu that ran along religious lines but intensified by socio-economic inequities. Throughout Kikuyu history, it seems that the disenfranchised sought less formal form of worship as the case of the Arathi demonstrates. It is arguable that they saw formal organized religion as the very institution that had subjected them to the subordinate socio-economic positions, and sought to escape it. At the same time, these individuals sought a form of worship that addressed their immediate concerns; material or spiritual. Consequently, the relationship between mainstream churches and marginal groups among the Kikuyu has always been strained. As noted earlier, Kenyatta, a prominent member of the Aregi churches, called

the Arathi “a bunch of lunatics.” As such, as recipients of this legacy, it is not unanticipated that the relationship between these two groups would continue to be hostile in the post-independence era.

This was especially evident in the late 1990s where various churches issued statements condemning the movement. In one instance, the Anglican Church in Kenya in called the Mungiki movement satanic. In other cases, church leaders condemned the movement, calling it retrogressive. This attitude led to the members of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK) to investigate why movements like Mungiki were on the rise. In the report detailing the results of the investigation, these churches had the following to say:

The rise and flourishing of cults of new religious movements is an indication of something missing in our families, society and churches. What is this, established churches are not doing for families, youth, women, etc. etc.?...At present the church’s care for her members is very weak. Counseling of members who are in problems is almost non-existent in many churches. This is making some followers look for any new religious movements, which can offer hope and “quasi solutions” to their predicaments.

The above statement reveals that mainstream churches partly felt responsible for the rise of movements like the Mungiki. These churches argued that they were not meeting the needs of all the members of their society, which is why religious divisions were occurring with the rise of religious movements like the Mungiki.

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Nonetheless, they ignored the fact that these divisions were not simply as a result of socio-economic issues. If that were the case, then there would have been religious movements similar to Mungiki in all parts of the country. I contend that this conflict between mainstream Kikuyu churches and the Mungiki was as a result of already present deep-seated doctrinal divisions among the Kikuyu. On the one hand, there was the legacy of the Kirore and Aregi, which attracted older middle class Kikuyus, and on the other hand there was the Arathi legacy, which attracted the younger, lower-income Kikuyu, as it seems to address their problems as Murray notes:

A new class of semi-educated dispossessed young Kikuyu frustrated from entering the world of money and power, is appearing, and there are signs that to young men and women (and older Kikuyu also) of this type the, the teachings of the Arathi will continue to make their appeal.  

Twenty years after Murray wrote the above statement, the Mungiki emerged. In embracing this kind of radical religious rhetoric, the Mungiki movement stood in an antagonistic relationship with the larger Kikuyu society. That the Mungiki have no doubts as to whom their conflict is with, is clear in the following statement:

We have fought to eliminate drug use among the youth. We want them sober and joining the church. When they are sober they will realize what has happened. Those Kikuyus in position of power are the ones who have issues with us. They know we will expose how they have taken the society down by grabbing all available resources. Those who fought for independence are not the ones who are benefitting.  

Multiple informants repeated similar sentiments showing that this is a collective thought among members of the Mungiki. Significantly, rather than end, the Mungiki has continued to exist as a group even after the election of a Kikuyu president in 2002, and

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have continued to have strained relationships with the Kikuyu-led government since then. This demonstrates that the *Mungiki* arose in response, not to external socio-economic and ethnic factors only, but rather to internal tensions within the community itself. All these conflicts no doubt provided an excellent platform for violence. Nevertheless, I contend that the biggest and most probable cause of violence associated with the *Mungiki*, had to do with leadership wrangles within the movement itself. The following section examines leadership wrangles between Njenga’s charismatic and secular leadership under Ndura Waruinge.

**Charismatic leadership and violence**

As argued in the previous chapter, Maina Njenga’s leadership embodied overwhelming characteristics of charismatic leadership. Nonetheless, the relationship between charismatic leadership and violence can be understood only if the dynamics between the charismatic leader and his followers are clear. Ruth Willner expounds on the important elements of charismatic leadership that I find useful in defining the relationship between Njenga as a charismatic leader and his followers. She contends that charismatic leadership is based upon the relationship that an individual has with his followers. She further posits that charismatic leadership can be distinguished from regular leadership by examining four dimensions: the leader-image dimension, the idea-acceptance dimension, the compliance dimension, and the emotional dimension.\(^{264}\)

a. The Leader-Image Dimension

The leader-image dimension refers to beliefs that the followers hold about their leader. Regular leaders are already perceived to have admirable traits that enable them to carry out specific tasks in their specific cultures. These may be wisdom, benevolence, and foresight, among others. In a charismatic relationship, however, followers believe that their leader has superhuman qualities or possesses to an extraordinary degree the qualities esteemed in their culture. It is not surprising that these followers attribute their leader’s gifts to the supernatural.

This was quite true among Mungiki members. Maina Njenga was viewed as a prophet, one with special gifts ranging from materializing in closed rooms, hearing conversations without being present, being wise, and, importantly, being imbued with the gift of prophecy. In one interview, I asked an informant what would happen if Njenga died. He answered, “He died for three days and was raised. He cannot die again. He is like our Jesus!”265 The members I interviewed repeated these sentiments in one form or another. Clearly, to them, Njenga was no ordinary human. Yet as mentioned above, this admiration is culturally based. For instance, among the early followers of Mungiki was the belief that Njenga’s presence had been foretold by some ancient Kikuyu prophecy. In this way, Njenga’s claim to prophecy attained a deeper value because it was steeped in Kikuyu cultural heritage.

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265 Gachoka Mwangi, Interview by Author, January 16th, 2012.
b. The Idea-Acceptance Dimension

In a regular leader-follower relationship, leaders are expected to give forth ideas, which the followers then evaluate and adopt, if those ideas are found to be reasonable. In charismatic leadership, however, the basis for the belief in what the leader says, do not have to exist, because in most cases, they do not count. Followers believe what the leader says just because he said it and he knows best. If he says it, then it is undeniably true.

This is perhaps quite evident in Mungiki members’ treatment of Maina Njenga’s words of prophecy and teachings. Time and again members assured me that Njenga’s words always came true and that he had never led them astray. The phrase, “chairman alisema (the chairman said)” was very common among members that I interviewed. This belief of Njenga’s ideas that was central to Mungiki’s existence. For instance, the Mungiki believed that the Kikuyu were the chosen group through whom God would exercise his kingdom on earth. And that it was the duty of the Mungiki to awaken the rest of the Kikuyu. Thus, he told them that the scripture in Zechariah 4:6 applied to them, “This is the word of Jehovah to Ze.rub’ba.bel, saying, ‘‘Not by a military force, nor by power, but my spirit,’” Jehovah of armies has said. ‘Who are you, O Great Mountain? Before Zer.bab’ba.bel you will become a level land.”266 Thus, despite their relatively small number, Njenga assured them they would eventually reign and that despite all persecution, God would be with them.

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266 Zechariah 4: 6, 7 (NWT).
c. The Compliance Dimension

This dimension concerns the follower’s obedience to a leader’s directives. In regular leadership, people obey because the commands are reasonable or lawful, or because it is to their advantage to obey, or because they are afraid of penalties for failure to comply. In charismatic leadership, they comply because the leader has given the command. If he has ordered it, it is their duty to obey. Willner argues that in a charismatic relationship, surrender of choice and judgment to the leader is typical: “Followers accept and believe the past was as the leader portrays it, that the present is as he depicts it, and that the future will be as he predicts it. They follow without hesitation his prescription for action.”

Wherever Njenga went and whatever he did, his followers went and did, too. This is evident in how his followers have been willing to accompany Njenga on whatever symbolic or physical journeys he has taken. At the nascent stages of the Mungiki, Njenga decided that they should associate with He Ma ya Ngai, and they all followed him there. When things did not work out with Ngonya wa Gakonya, Njenga decided to move away from the group and stand on his own. Once again, his members followed him. The most notable instance was in 2003, when Njenga decided to get baptized in a mainstream church under Bishop Margaret Wanjiru. On that day thousands of Mungiki followers were baptized with him, but he soon left Wanjiru’s church. This is further evidence of the continuing internal religious conflict among the Kikuyu. Those interviewed said that while Njenga was in prison years before, he had prophesied that he would be released and that they would get baptized in a Christian church. Indeed, as soon as he was released
from prison he was baptized in a much-publicized affair. Nobody dared question the reason they were abandoning their way of life. Thus, even though they no longer go by the name *Mungiki*, the influence that Njenga has on his followers is still very much intact.

d. The Emotional Dimension

This relates to the type and intensity of the emotional commitment of followers to a leader. Highly popular leaders elicit some emotions like affection, admiration, and sometimes, even love. In a charismatic relationship, however, the emotions aroused are not only more intense in degree, but they are also of a different order. The followers respond to their leader with awe, reverence, and blind faith—in short, with emotions close to religious worship.

In my opinion, this is the strongest identifier of a charismatic relationship between Njenga and his followers. In the past decade or so, the *Mungiki* has been in the media for allegedly perpetrating violent acts. Especially noteworthy is the 2007 post-election violence. The *Mungiki* allegedly participated in the intense bloodshed that ensued. The then-minister of security in Kenya, the Late John Michuki, is said to have given a “shoot to kill” order to members of the police force. A special campaign called “operation maliza Kwe kwe (Operation eliminate weeds)” aimed to eliminate the “menace” of *Mungiki* was established, leading to the execution of at least 500 *Mungiki* members according, to the Kenyan Human Rights Commission. Those I spoke to argue that the numbers are quite conservative, and expressed that they had all lost someone they knew.


“Many of us have been killed or disappeared. At one point it became a death sentence to be known as Mungiki. That is why we cut our trademark dread locks,” an informant told me. I then wanted to know why they stayed as part of a movement that could mean their own death. One individual told me:

There is something special about Njenga. Why do you think they (those in power) are after him? We recognize it, and they recognize it too. By attacking us, they really are after him. They want to weaken him because they are afraid of the kind of power he has. If he wants to summon thousands of young men in twenty minutes he can. Even more important, I believe in him. He has never misled us. We are being persecuted for our faith and for that, I would never dream of living, even if it meant death. 269

These remarks were common among the individuals I talked to. They exhibited feelings of devotion, trust and love toward Njenga. What would inspire such devotion towards and individual? Lawne Dawson offers a convincing argument when he writes:

From a psychoanalytic perspective, followers attribute charismatic qualities and power to a leader as a way of resolving the unconscious conflict they are experiencing between their ego and their ego ideal. Projecting the ego ideal or the sense of what the society expects of them onto the leader, and then entering into a condition of deep personal identification with the leader, allows followers to satisfy vicariously the demands of the ego ideal, thereby relieving themselves of the profound psychological tension created by their actual failure to live up to the ego ideal. The relief of transferring this responsibility can be quite euphoric, easily leading to the misattribution of the source of relief to the leader and his or her movement. The release of the followers from the pangs of conscience also serves to weld a sense of close identity with others undergoing the same experience-other members of the community. Each new conversion, in turn, reinforces the identification of the existing followers with the leader. A

269 Mwangi, Interview by Author, January 24th, 2012.
comforting group ego ideal emerges, for a time at least with the charismatic leader as its symbolic focal point and primary mechanism of expression.\textsuperscript{270}

Most of the \textit{Mungiki} members were homeless street boys with no roots in the society. As Kikuyu young men, they were aware that their condition did not satisfy societal expectations. In Njenga, they saw a young man just like themselves, able to transcend the challenges that they were all facing and offering hope for them through spiritual leadership. It was as though through Njenga, they could ultimately live a satisfying life. From my interviews, it was evident that they felt their lives had improved exponentially since becoming members of Njenga’s community. Thus, to tell them that \textit{Mungiki} was not right for them was tantamount to returning them to their former condition. For most of these young men, death is a better choice than abandoning their leader and savior.

In view of this intense relationship, Charismatic leaders often find themselves in especially precarious positions, as they continuously have to reinforce their legitimacy. Unlike traditional leaders whose source of legitimacy is social structures, charismatic leaders have to personally support their own authority. Each of their actions establishes, reinforces, or undermines their authority. Dawson contends that when charismatic leaders fail to transform into traditional or rational legal, in essence failing to effectively perpetuate their legitimacy, then the movement either fails or implodes and becomes unstable. It is during these phases that the potential for violence increases.\textsuperscript{271}


\textsuperscript{271} Dawson, “Crisis of charismatic legitimacy,” 85.
Dawson further suggests that a successful charismatric leader must strike a dynamic balance between asserting too much dominance and not asserting enough. To go either way brings instability. There are four endemic problems, to maintaining balance within charismatically led movements: 1. Maintaining the leader’s persona, 2. Moderating the effects of the psychological identification of followers with the leader, 3. Negotiating the routinization of charisma, and 4. Achieving new successes. In negotiating these components, the leader’s actions or non-actions could foster violent behavior within the group. 272

The charismatic leader has to maintain a delicate balance when it comes to interactions with his or her followers. Too much exposure, and his or her human shortcomings become evident, thus shuttering the polished image he or she wants to project. Too little exposure, and the members have nothing upon which to build their devotion and their personal identification with the leader. The situation might be further worsened when there is a collapse between the leader and the followers. The charismatic leader’s insulated condition might also prevent them from realizing that subordinates with their own agenda are misusing their authority, which often leads to debilitating power struggles. Nonetheless, for the case of the Mungiki, the probable causes of violence might be challenges incurred in the mediation of the following arenas: moderating identification with the leaders and negotiating routinization of charisma.

272 Ibid., 86.
a) **Moderating Identification with the Leader**

As is the case with many charismatically led movements, fusion of identities between followers and leaders is quite common. Thus, the followers see all attacks on the leaders as attacks on themselves. This has to do with the strong emotional attachments discussed above. Njenga was arrested for a variety of charges, and his wife was found murdered, among other tribulations. His followers viewed these as targeted acts against their leader and many were not happy. It would therefore not be surprising if some among them participated in retaliatory acts of violence.

b) **Negotiating the Routinization of Charisma**

The success of a charismatic movement can often lead to problems as the need for bureaucratic structure arises. As this frequently means diverting some of the leader’s influence to his or her trusted officials, charismatic leaders are often likely to resist this transition. As Doyle Johnson aptly states, “some members will not be as emotionally dependent on the leaders as others and thus will have less reason to grant total loyalty to the leader.” Yet, how effectively the charismatic leader controls this process, determine his or her eventual success. Nonetheless, this negotiation is seldom trouble free. The case of the *Mungiki* is illustrative of this difficulty.

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Structure and Power Struggles within the Mungiki Movement

From its inception in 1987, the Mungiki movement was mainly a religious movement with Maina Njenga, its founder, as its spiritual head. Having moved to Nairobi in the early 1990s, Njenga was responsible for providing religious instructions that governed the way of life of Mungiki members in the city. Njenga surrounded himself with close associates most of whom were present at the beginning of the movement. These individuals were responsible for relaying spiritual messages to the followers across the city. One such individual was Ndura Waruinge, Njenga’s cousin.

By the mid-1990s, Mungiki’s numbers had increased, making it harder to effectively manage the group. Ndura Waruinge divided into manageable cells, which varied in numbers according to geographical regions. The administration of these cells was left to senior members or those who had been members of the Mungiki for the longest time. These cells also became the basic units of operation and channels of communication between Njenga and his followers. Additionally, these cells also became units of discipline for members. If an individual member transgressed the laws of the movement especially of thahu, then the cell members were responsible for disciplining them, which often included beatings. One member explained the discipline in the following manner:

If you transgress, say we find out you smoked or committed adultery, we discipline you. We give like 20 strokes of beatings, sit you down and ask if you understand why you are being disciplined. If you understand your mistake you are not likely to repeat it. We are each other’s policemen.\(^\text{275}\)

\(^{275}\) Daniel Wanjohi, Interview by Author, February 2\(^{nd}\), 2012.
In this manner, Njenga and Waruinge were able to establish firm control over their members. About this form control Waruinge stated the following, “I let each member be his brother’s keeper. This was a very effective way of control.” This transformation gave the *Mungiki* movement a secular component with Waruinge at the helm. Nonetheless, the spiritual and secular components of *Mungiki’s* leadership would soon collide.

This collision came through socio-economic projects that Waruinge instituted. Waruinge used the cells of administration as the basis of these economic projects. These projects ranged from animal husbandry, recycling, trash collection, security keeping in the slums among others. For many young members of *Mungiki*, these projects were a matter of life and death, as they helped many of them turn from a life of crime. Having been assigned to different economic projects, each member was required to contribute Ksh. 20\(^ {276} \) to the collective pot.\(^ {277} \) This money served as capital for whatever projects the movement embarked on. Nonetheless, those participants had to agree to adhere to the movements’ ideology. This is evident in the following sentiments by some of the projects’ beneficiaries:

> I used to be a thief. If it were not for them, I would be dead by I joined the group, I found the boys (*Mungiki* members) with small businesses. They would look for waste paper, metals, and other things for recycling. It took about three months before I was baptized. I was struggling with drugs, so it was not until I was able to stop that I became a full member. I have not stolen from anyone or committed crime since then.\(^ {278} \)

\(^ {276} \text{This is approximately equivalent $25 cents (US).}\)

\(^ {277} \text{Ndura Waruinge, Interview by Author, February 24\(^ \text{th} \), 2012. I was also able to corroborate this from other members who actually received punishment for not following orders.}\)

\(^ {278} \text{John Gacheru, Interview by Author, February 2\(^ \text{nd} \), 2012.}\)
Another member noted the following:

We had groups that we call merry-go rounds. Every week we would meet and contribute money that we would give to one person, and the following week another person. This allowed us to have lump sums to do whatever we needed to. We kept pigs and chicken. We then started selling them and the money we made we begun a cooperative called Ngara Youth Sacco. We grew trees, and sold them too. Even today we have them. We made considerable amounts of money from these projects.\textsuperscript{279}

These practical projects enabled these young men to find a place to belong. Yet, the economic aspect was never without the promise of loyalty to the movement and its ideology. As a result they became quite loyal to the movement and its leaders.

Moreover, these self-help projects extended benefitted more than the members of the movement. In some areas they controlled water, garbage collection, security and even the supply of electricity.\textsuperscript{280} For a while, it seemed like the \textit{Mungiki} was having a positive impact on the poor. Perhaps, this is why Kagwanja contends that these were mainly a part of “moral crusade” in behalf of poor people against the failures and injustices of the government and corrupt politicians.\textsuperscript{281}

Nonetheless, while the poor certainly benefitted from these projects, albeit briefly, I contend that they were simply the means through Waruinge attempted to expand his power within and without the movement. Through these projects and further bureaucratization of the movement, he and his close associates begun attaining power that they did not have before. As Dawsone opines, “successful lieutenants, either individually or collectively, may begin to explicitly or implicitly to usurp some of the

\textsuperscript{279} Daniel Wanjohi, Interview by Author, January 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2012.

\textsuperscript{280} Waruinge, Interview by Author, February 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2012.

prestige and power granted to the original charismatic leader as they conduct the daily business of the religious organization.”

This increase in power to individuals is especially apparent in the person of Waruinge. He credits himself with all the socio-economic projects that the *Mungiki* came to be known for. He even goes as far as to assert that he was responsible for the rumors that the *Mungiki* were beheading people. He said the following in our interview:

I then noticed that all the shops that were at the central business district were doing very well belonged to Indians. So, from the amount of money that we had being collecting from the members, I told I gave the new ones some money and told them to go to the industrial area to procure goods. For instance, if the Indian’s store sold shoes for Ksh 3000, I told them to get the same shoe type and sell it for Ksh 600 right in front of the store. In no time they were outselling the Indians. Of course they were not happy and they started sending the city council *askaris (officers)* to harass us. It is then that I came up with an idea. I asked the young men to print out fliers and send them to the Indian storeowners. These fliers contained threats with threats, saying that we knew that they were responsible for the harassment that we were receiving from the city council officials and that any one who continued to do that would be beheaded. That is how the rumor that *Mungiki* was beheading people started.

This narrative of violence was quite telling of what was already happening in the group. By using the narrative of violence, Waruinge was using fear as instrument of control. I posit that these activities were Waruinge’s attempt to assert his authority within the *Mungiki* movement at the expense of Njenga’s charismatic leadership. Additionally, the bureaucratization of the movement and the accompanying projects meant that the leadership entered into a conflict-riddled relationship with the government by providing services, such as garbage collection, public transportation control, and even security

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283 Waruinge, Interview by Author, February 24th, 2012.
provision in the slums,\textsuperscript{284} that the state would normally provide. Waruinge’s statement about the \textit{matatus} (public transportation) illustrates this point:

After I realized the boys had become too many, we were running out of projects to give them. So, I came up with the idea of going into the \textit{matatu} industry. That I did not do it in the right way, but it was necessary. We destabilized it. I sent people to destabilize it and cause chaos. These \textit{matatu} owners did not know where to turn. Because they had heard that I as providing security all over, they thought I could help. So they came and asked me. I told them I could try but only if they paid me. We agreed on Ksh. 2000 for every \textit{matatu}. The next day, I stopped the chaos and they paid us. So they handed over the \textit{matatu} industry to me. I instituted a policy that if anyone wanted to operate a \textit{matatu}, they needed to come to me for a driver, a conductor and a tout. Just like that, they gave me the control of the \textit{matatu} industry. Of course the government was not happy because of course we were not paying taxes.\textsuperscript{285}

Further straining the relationship was Waruinge’s attempt to use the \textit{Mungiki} for political gains. Waruinge said that he had a vision for the \textit{Mungiki}. He wanted them to take over the government, and he had put in place practical measures to ensure the success of his goals. He said that he had access to some military trucks that he had been planning to use for a coup.\textsuperscript{286} He further claimed that had support from powerful people, and he still had a big influence on the \textit{Mungiki}. These activities led to a volatile situation between members of the \textit{Mungiki} and the government.

While seeking socio-economic independence for his people and whatever clout that would bring him, Waruinge made the movement a target of violence from state agencies, which rightly felt threatened by these activities of the \textit{Mungiki}. This precarious condition made the movement vulnerable to a number of potentially dangerous

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\textsuperscript{285} Waruinge, Interview by Author, February 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2012.

influences. At this time, politicians had begun realizing the potential power of the leaders of the *Mungiki*. Kagwanja posits that this involvement, which was especially pronounced during election years, was as result of generational discourses and signified the attempt of the youth to assert themselves politically.  

On the contrary, I argue that the involvement with politics by both Njenga and Waruinge was a means to assert their power within and over the *Mungiki*. Njenga realized that with economic liberation and enrichment of key lieutenants he was no longer as powerful as he once was. He needed to take actions to reassert his authority. He still had many faithful followers who believed in him and would do absolutely anything for him. There is no evidence that he ever ordered violent acts, but I strongly believe that his followers would not hesitate to do so if he ever required them to. Waruinge, for his part, realized that if he continued to be in Njenga’s shadow, he would not achieve the power he wanted.

In 2003, Waruinge left the *Mungiki* movement, and with him went individuals who benefitted much from his projects. Waruinge claims that he left because Njenga allowed people in power to come between them saying, “These people were sowing seeds of distrust between us and Njenga could not see it. I was afraid for my life. So I left and joined the church.” I argue that Waruinge left as a result of Njenga’s activities to reassert his authority in the movement. He once again called upon his prophetic gifts,

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287 Kagwanja, “Power to Uhuru,” 51-75.


290 Waruinge, Interview by Author, February 24th, 2012.
uttering words of doom towards those who dared defy him. He, after all, was the chosen one of God. Waruinge believed that, too. Besides, Waruinge had goals for the movement that were not quite in harmony with Njenga’s objectives at the time. For the group’s survival, Waruinge’s exit was necessary.

The turbulent circumstances caused by the routinization of the movement led to a number of undesirable outcomes. Violence in the name of the *Mungiki* became very prevalent. The name *Mungiki* became synonymous with horror. It is not possible to tell if all the violent acts that happened were actually perpetrated by the *Mungiki*. Njenga’s followers categorically deny having done those things. They claim that violence was being conducted in their name by renegade *Mungiki* under Waruinge or individuals the government planted to ruin *Mungiki*’s reputation in the eyes of the public. I will admit that proof of these claims was hard to come by.

Nevertheless, it is not beyond the realm of reality that some among the *Mungiki* were susceptible to manipulation and agreed to be paid by politicians to carry out their dirty jobs not in the name of religion. One character I encountered during my research definitely gave me reason to believe so. Following our initial meeting, he started calling me saying that he had access to the leader of the group and he could help me meet him as long as I gave him money. When I refused to do so, he called me again saying his mother was in the hospital needing urgent operation. He then wanted me to give him money. Once again I declined. This is when he resorted to threats saying that I did not know with whom I was dealing. He possibly counted on *Mungiki*’s unsavory reputation to intimidate me into giving him money.
However, the majority of the people I met were quite kind. One particular incidence helped me to see the other side of the Mungiki. I was waiting for my guide to arrive and introduce me to another member of the Mungiki at his fruit stall in one of the main markets in Nairobi, when a homeless woman with mental health issues approached a neighboring fruit stall. The owner of the first stall shooed her away. Then the man I was to interview called the woman to his stall gave her a bowl of fruits and sent her on her way. To me that act of kindness was remarkable and quite unlike the vicious people I had come to believe they were.

This chapter has examined the role of Njenga as a charismatic leader of the Mungiki movement and how this has shaped the movements activities. I have suggested that although I did not personally gather evidence of violence during my three-month interaction with the Mungiki, Njenga’s magnetic hold on his followers makes violence a possibility. It would not be impossible to imagine that these individuals would be willing to do anything for Njenga, including violence, should they feel that he was threatened or if he asked them to.

Moreover, I have examined the internal power struggle between the Njenga and the national coordinator Waruinge. I have argued that Waruinge’s attempt to solidify his authority within the movement by initiating socio-economic projects for Mungiki members put him on a collision course with both Njenga and the government. I argued in instances that Njenga’s participated in political activities, it was in attempt to preserve his authority within the Mungiki. Nonetheless, Njenga successfully survived the routinization of his movement by facilitating Waruinge’s exit from the movement. After Waruinge’s exit, Njenga abandoned his political overtones because they were no longer necessary.
Nonetheless, even during these power struggles, Njenga always framed his actions in a prophetic cloak saying that he God had directed him to do these actions. He has thus continued to reinforce his image as a savior-prophet, often playing the role of a martyr for the sake of his followers, as this is what enabled him to acquire his charismatic image and, therefore, authority in the first place.
Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine how post-colonial Africans have continued to use their cultural backgrounds to negotiate and re-center themselves in a changing world. Underlying this project is the assumption that if enslaved Africans in the New World could draw upon their cultural backgrounds despite the forcible removal from their cultural roots, they would do the same while on the continent. I have argued that reactions to post-colonial socio-economic challenges can be better understood by exploring how Africans have used their specific cultural symbols, specifically religious concepts, to cope with the transformations within their societies as a result of their encounter with colonialism and globalization. Through the analysis of the Mungiki movement among the Kikuyu, which emerged during the 1980s, I demonstrated that the resilience and flexibility of these cultural symbols has made them continually relevant to the challenges of the post-colonial world.

I began my study by examining the pre-colonial Kikuyu society in the 19th century just before the encounter with the British. As such, the first chapter detailed the organization of pre-colonial Kikuyu society, arguing that this was the original source of the divisions. It showed that despite the seemingly egalitarian nature, the society was divided along socio-economic lines. This stratification meant that young people, women, and other poor people were often at a disadvantage. The socio-economic events of the 19th century brought about changes within the Kikuyu society that intensified these rifts.
One way these changes came was through trade. With the Kikuyu becoming more engaged in long distance trade, previously disadvantaged individuals found alternative source of wealth independent of their elders. This caused internal generational tensions. The second was the advent of British administrators and traders. These administrators were also quick to note the ridge-by-ridge rivalries that existed and exploited them. By playing on these pre-existing rivalries, the British further destabilized Kikuyu society, making it susceptible to changes that would come during colonialism.

The third chapter then demonstrated how these socio-economic divisions among the Kikuyu, determined the pattern of conversion to Christianity. Consequently, it became such that religious practices would always be intricately linked to the socio-economic status of many Kikuyus. This disjointed conversion created multiple often-competing brands of Christianity that was often a source of tensions that became manifested during times of intense socio-economic crisis. In this sectioned I posited that the rise of the Kikuyu Spirit churches was evidence of this religious fragmentation that reinforced socio-economic disparity. It was noteworthy that the majority of those who founded and others who subsequently joined the spirit churches were young disenfranchised individuals who had grown up under colonial domination. Members of these churches condemned those of Kikuyu Independent churches who seemed to thrive materially. Members of the Independent churches had taken advantage of mission education and had subsequently begun their own Independent schools. The resentment that inevitably arose from this unequal distribution of resources significantly shaped how the Kikuyu as a whole would respond to crises. I argued that this was one of the main
reasons that the Mau Mau rebellion against colonialism was uniformly supported among the Kikuyu.

In chapter four, I focused on how this legacy of a divided religious identity and resistance to crises that began during the colonial period continues to endure in the post-independence period. Through my analysis of the Mungiki movement, I demonstrated the resilience of these religious rivalries that have prevented the Kikuyu to act in a unified manner in times of crises. I cast the Mungiki as an heir to the Arathi religious tradition and as such a reflection of the internal struggles between the older wealthier generation and the younger disposed generations as both groups manipulate cultural symbols available to them. The younger generation, just like their Arathi predecessors, found mainstream Christianity to be ineffective in dealing with their immediate problems. It is not surprising then that these young individuals have continued to be empowered by cultural symbols available to them through the Mungiki movement.

In the fifth chapter, I addressed the controversial nature of the movement. It is undeniable that the Mungiki have an unsavory reputation. Despite the fact that during my fieldwork I was unable to gather evidence tying the Mungiki to the alleged acts of violence, that does not necessarily absolve them of any wrong doing. In this chapter I sought to explain violence within religious movements such as the Mungiki. Using Weberian concept of charisma and Dawson’s theoretical framework of “crisis of charismatic leadership,” I demonstrated that internal leadership struggles could account for much of the said violence within religious movements such as the Mungiki. I further

argued that as a result of already existing tensions within the Kikuyu society, it is not surprising that the alleged violence by the *Mungiki* is against other Kikuyus.

**Interpretation of Findings on the *Mungiki***

My interest in the *Mungiki* movement goes back to my years as a young child growing up in Kona Mbaya village in the North Western part of Kenya. My stepfather donned long dreadlocks, which earned him the alias *Mungiki*. At that time in 1994, all that was known of the movement was the practice of its members to adorn themselves with long locks and to sniff tobacco. Nearly twenty years later, Kenyan public opinion has drastically changed towards the movement. Despite the movement’s unsavory reputation, hostile government actions against it, thousands of young men and women continue to join its ranks. I wanted to understand what exactly moved these individuals to do so. Were most of them so desperate that they had a death wish? Was it all about supposed material benefits? How did they reconcile their personal morals if any with the alleged acts of violence they perpetrated? The most important question that I had was, why was their no other movement like the *Mungiki* among other ethnic groups in Kenya?

The literature on *Mungiki* I encountered mostly concerned itself in attempting to define what the *Mungiki* movement was by studying their apparent behavior, rather than understanding the forces that shaped those resistance strategies. On the one hand there was Gecaga who viewed the *Mungiki* as a representative case of “religious movements [involvement] in the political process of democratization. “She further described the movement as part of a larger religious phenomenon that continues to demand inclusion in
the democratization processes in Kenya. Gecaga further emphasized the functionalist nature of religion, stating that it provides powerful emotional symbols of group identity that bind people together in the midst of great opposition. She contends that these movements emerge especially during times of crisis, providing coping mechanisms. She then gives examples of religious movements in Africa from the colonial to the post-independent periods that have emerged in times of crisis. Gecaga uses Dini Ya Msambwa, Mumbo Cult, and the Karing’a religious movements in colonial Kenya to argue her case. She attributes their emergence two factors: “The need to resist cultural forms of neocolonialism by rallying followers’ traditional values to challenge the orthodoxy behind the mainstream churches as well as the injustices of the state; and economic deprivation or exploitation, most importantly, the loss of land.” Thus, she portrays these movements as being direct responses to crisis that have arisen during the colonial and post-independence period.

Nonetheless, as I noted earlier, focusing on the functionalist aspect of these religious movements with little attention to the religious ideology behind the movements really raises more questions than it answers. For instance, Gecaga cites the landlessness and the economic deprivations of members of the Mungiki as the main reason for its emergence, but many other groups in Kenya were experiencing the same economic hardships. Why is it that similar movements did not sprout up through the country? Does the intensity of hardship determine where such movements emerge? What about the

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294 Ibid., 58-89.
spiritual aspect of the movements? What is the place of religious rhetoric in determining the nature of the movement’s activities? Additionally, how do the members of the group reconcile their ideology and daily practices?

On the other hand, Anderson’s work on the movement completely discounts the place of ideology in shaping the activities of this movement. He argues that while the movement might have been religious when it was still confined to the rural areas, its nature changed as soon as it stepped into the urban milieu. He cites Mungiki’s departure from Ngonya Wa Gakonya’s He Ma ya Ngai movement in the 1990s as the point of transformation from a religious to an urban vigilante movement.²⁹⁵ Using media reports on the alleged activities of Mungiki, and statements by the movement’s national coordinator Ndura Waruinge, Anderson contends that by the year 2000, the movement had lost its religious nature.²⁹⁶ While this argument might explain the apparent rise in violent acts allegedly perpetrated by the Mungiki, it still does not explain why unlike other vigilante movements in Nairobi, the movement has continued to grow and to gain popularity among Kikuyu youth, despite the violent governmental crackdown.

Despite these gaps, these earlier works were definitely quite enlightening as I embarked on my research of the Mungiki. However, as I spent my time with members of this group, observing, interviewing and travelling with them, I realized that we have been focusing on the wrong end of the phenomenon. I realized that a big section of the Mungiki movement is religious rhetoric, something that has been relegated to the background by scholarly works. This is not to discount the position of politics or socio-

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 554.
economics dynamics within the movement. Instead, all these other facets of the
technological and economic projects that Ndura Waruinge began for them, these young people
were also primarily loyal to Maina Njenga. They spoke of him as spiritual leader,
prophet, and one who cannot die, among other things. They were in awe of the things that
Maina could allegedly do. They spoke of their religious heritage that came down to them
through their forefathers. Even though most of their belief systems were based on the
more recent Arathi phenomenon than their pre-colonial Kikuyu thought, it resonated
quite deeply with them and impacted their day-to-day lives. It was also noteworthy that
even when they spoke about formal politics, they spoke of it within a religious
framework. As one Mungiki member told me, “We are God’s instruments on earth. We
will bring his kingdom on earth. We began with the Kikuyu those who joined us are with
us. Now we want to expand to the rest of the world. In fact we have our people in South
Africa.”297

I also believe that Maina Njenga is convinced of his own powers as a charismatic
prophet. Njenga’s power wisely based upon Kikuyu cultural symbols, has given him a
very powerful hold over his followers. This would explain why many members of the
movement interviewed for this project would be willing to die for their course. I asked

one individual why he stayed despite the violent governmental crackdown. He said the following:

It is my faith, Chairman (Njenga) has never misled us, and I do not think he will start now. I know he has God’s support otherwise he would have been eliminated. They have tried so many times to kill him and to persecute him. They have not succeeded. For me that is proof that God is with him. I will not go anywhere.\(^{298}\)

Whether or not attempts on Njenga’s life are real, this follower was convinced that Njenga had miraculously escaped assassination attempts. In his mind that is clear evidence of divine approval upon Njenga. Surely, if God is with Njenga, he will be with all those who stick by him.

Additionally, through my research, I discovered that if we are ever to truly understand the *Mungiki* movement, it is first of all necessary to understand internal dynamics within the Kikuyu society itself. Understanding the internal tensions within the community will help us explain the hostile attitudes that certain segments of the Kikuyu community might have against the movement. The recent acts of violence that have been associated with the movement are not sufficient to explain this attitude. This is because even in its nascent stages in the late 1980s, the movement still caused conflict within the within the mainstream religious community among the Kikuyu. It was as though the *Mungiki* reminded them of past religious traditions that were uncomfortable to the established Kikuyu churches. We know this from the conference that the National Council of Churches in Kenya held to address the question of *Mungiki*.\(^{299}\)

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\(^{298}\) Njoroge Waweru, Interview by Author, January 24\(^{th}\) 2012, Nairobi, Kenya.

What does all this mean? This study proposes that, religious movements in post-colonial Africa should be studied for just what they are, religious movements. There is a need to give these movements agency in determining their own nature because it is certainly not an accident that they choose religious platforms of expression. This does not mean that socio-economic and political elements should be ignored. In fact religious ideology is not mutually exclusive from these other factors, as the case of the Kikuyu society has demonstrated. Yet, if we are to properly understand these movements’ activities we need to go beyond the immediate socio-economic and political contexts. These groups do not occur in cultural vacuums, rather they are heirs to rich cultural traditions. As such, contextualizing these movements within the history of the communities within which they occur will go a long way in assisting in this regard.

Limitations of the Study

Just like any other research projects, the present study had several limitations. The first limitation was the fact that one individual introduced most of my respondents to me. This individual is in the higher ranks within the movement having been part of it for the last twelve years. He was introduced to me by a former workmate for my first interview and from their he offered to introduce me to other members of the *Mungiki*. He took me to their work places, he had some come to meet me in prearranged areas of their choice, and even made arrangements for me to meet Maina Njenga. The biggest challenge that arose from this process was the fact that my sample of those interviewed was by no means random. These were all individuals selected probably because they were articulate about their beliefs. I would have preferred to recruit respondents myself but I neither had the time nor resources needed for that. I was however able to do this on a small scale
when I visited Ol-ng’arua farm belonging to Njenga. I walked around the property talking to individuals freely and they expressed similar sentiments as I had heard earlier.

Another limitation was the fact that my study concentrated on the *Mungiki* in Nairobi and to a small extent the rural areas of Ol-Ng’arua. Which means that my data can mostly be used to understand this movement within urban areas. While I would like to believe that the highly compartmentalized structure of the movement would enable the movement to function uniformly both in the rural and urban settings, I do not have enough data to back that up.

The final and the most unfortunate limitation on my study is the absence of the voice of women. In my fieldwork on the *Mungiki*, I encountered several women many of them wives or sisters of *Mungiki* members. From my brief interviews with a few of them, I realized they too have their own story to tell. Unfortunately, due to time and financial constraints, I knew I would not do their story justice in this particular study. I strongly believe that the women within this movement have a significant role that they play whether directly or indirectly to keep this movement thriving. They are the ones that lose brothers and husbands whenever *Mungiki* members die as a result of associated violence. They also most probably transmit this religious ideology to their children as part of their upbringing. My research would have definitely been enriched with the inclusion of their story.

Indeed, the Kikuyu just like any other African society continue to depend on their cultural heritage to shape their responses to crisis. As we have seen in this study, this does not always mean unity. Despite the fact that they continue to be divided along these
religious lines as a result of their socio-economic inequities, it is evident that the Kikuyu have found within their cultural background, practical symbols that have sustained them in times of need. Indeed, regardless of what side they choose, they will always “feel at home.”
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Oral interviews

I. From January to March 2012, I conducted interviews with 50 members of the Mungiki, including the founding members Maina Njenga and Ndura Waruinge. These interviews were absolutely important in the reconstruction of the Mungiki’s ideologies, and its members’ attitudes, socio-cultural backgrounds and practices. As discussed in the dissertation, Mungiki members exist in a contentious relationship with the government and the larger society. Therefore, to protect the identities of my interviewees from Mungiki's rank and file, I used pseudonyms in the dissertation and removed all identifiers. It is for this reason that I am not listing their names in the Bibliography.

II. In the reconstruction of divisions among the Kikuyu in the colonial period, I used oral interviews conducted between 1970-1971, and kindly made available to me by David Sandgren
Books and Articles


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