

Inculturation of *Mburi Cia Kiama* Rituals and the Spirituality of Presbyterian Church Men Fellowship (PCMF) in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa

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Abstract: This study examines the inculturation of *mburi cia kiama* rituals within the spirituality of the Presbyterian Church Men Fellowship (PCMF) in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA). Rooted in Gikuyu Traditional Religion, these rituals embody key aspects of eldership, communal identity, and spiritual authority. Despite established Presbyterian doctrines, the continued participation of PCMF members in these rituals reflects an ongoing interaction between Christian faith and indigenous religious expressions, raising concerns about spiritual authenticity. Guided by Victor Turner's theory of ritual symbolism, the study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze the symbolic meanings of these rituals and their implications for Christian spirituality. Findings indicate that elements such as sacrifice, communal belonging, and identity formation resonate with Christian values. However, the absence of structured theological engagement has contributed to uncritical participation and dual religious identity. The study concludes that a model of corrective inculturation can provide a constructive pathway for integrating culturally significant symbols into Christian practice. When theologically grounded, inculturation can enhance spiritual authenticity while maintaining doctrinal integrity within the PCEA.

Keywords: Inculturation, Mburi Cia Kiama, PCMF, Spirituality, Gikuyu Traditional Religion.

1. Introduction

The relationship between Christianity and African traditional religious practices remains a significant concern in African theology. In many African contexts, including among the Agikuyu of Kenya, traditional rituals continue to shape religious identity and spiritual expression. Within the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), the continued participation of Presbyterian Church Men Fellowship (PCMF) members in *mburi cia kiama* rituals raises important questions regarding the interaction between Christian spirituality and indigenous cultural practices. This study examines how such rituals may be critically engaged through inculturation to enhance, rather than undermine, Christian spirituality.

2. Background of the Study

Mburi cia kiama rituals are deeply embedded within the socio-religious and cultural life of the Agikuyu community. Historically, these rituals mark the progressive transition of men into various grades of eldership within the council of elders (*kiama*), a central institution in Gikuyu governance, spirituality, and social organization (Kenyatta, 1938; Middleton, 1953). Entry into the *kiama* is not merely a social elevation but a sacred process that involves ritual acts such as the offering of goats, communal feasting, and participation in libation practices. These rituals signify moral maturity, social responsibility, and spiritual authority within the community.

The symbolic significance of *mburi cia kiama* rituals extends beyond their external performance. They embody key elements of African spirituality, including purification, covenantal relationships, communal belonging, and the mediation between the visible and invisible worlds (Mbiti, 1969; Idowu, 1973). Through these rituals, participants are incorporated into a sacred order that connects the living, the ancestors, and the divine. This interconnected worldview reflects the broader African understanding of religion as an all-encompassing reality that permeates every aspect of life (Mugambi, 1991). Consequently, *mburi cia kiama* rituals function not only as cultural practices but also as vehicles for expressing and transmitting Gikuyu religious identity across generations.

Within the contemporary Christian context, particularly in the PCEA, these traditional practices present a complex theological challenge. The PCEA, grounded in Reformed theology, emphasizes spirituality expressed through biblical teaching, sacraments, and ecclesiastical structures such as confirmation and ordination (PCEA Practice and Procedure Manual, 1998). However, the continued participation of PCMF members in *mburi cia kiama* rituals—despite their full incorporation into the Church—suggests a tension between doctrinal expectations and lived religious experience. This tension is further complicated by the dual religious identity that many Agikuyu Christians embody, where adherence to Christian faith coexists with commitment to traditional cultural

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practices (Kiaziku, 2009).

From the perspective of the PCEA, *mburi cia kiama* rituals are often viewed as contradictory to Christian teachings. This perception is largely informed by concerns over elements such as allegiance to traditional deities like Mwene Nyaga, sacrificial practices, and the consumption of traditional brews, which appear to conflict with Christian doctrines and ethical standards. As a result, the Church has historically adopted a condemnatory stance towards such practices, reflecting the influence of early missionary theology that tended to dismiss African traditional religions as incompatible with Christianity (Shorter, 1980; Gichure, 2008).

However, this approach has not adequately addressed the underlying cultural and spiritual realities of African Christians. The persistence of *mburi cia kiama* rituals among PCMF members indicates that these practices continue to fulfill important functions related to identity, belonging, and spiritual meaning that are not fully met within the existing structures of the Church. Studies have shown that African Christians often interpret and experience their faith through cultural lenses, leading to a synthesis of religious expressions rather than a strict separation (Magesa, 2004). This reality challenges the Church to move beyond binary categorizations of “Christian” versus “traditional” and to adopt a more integrative theological approach.

The concept of inculturation provides a useful framework for addressing this challenge. Inculturation refers to the dynamic and reciprocal interaction between the Christian message and a particular cultural context, allowing the gospel to be expressed in culturally meaningful ways (Shorter, 1988). It recognizes that Christianity is not culture-free but is always embodied within specific cultural forms. As such, inculturation seeks to discern and appropriate those elements of culture that are compatible with the gospel while transforming those that are not (Gichure, 2008).

In the case of *mburi cia kiama* rituals, several symbolic elements, such as sacrifice, communal participation, rites of passage, and moral instruction, resonate with key aspects of Christian spirituality. For instance, the notion of sacrifice finds parallels in the Christian understanding of Christ’s atoning work, while communal feasting reflects the fellowship embodied in the Eucharist. Similarly, the transition into eldership within the *kiama* can be compared to the process of spiritual formation and leadership development within the Church. These parallels suggest that *mburi cia kiama* rituals possess transformative potential that can be harnessed through a process of critical reinterpretation.

Nevertheless, the process of inculturation must be approached with theological caution to avoid syncretism, where incompatible religious elements are merged without discernment. The goal is not to uncritically adopt traditional practices but to engage them critically, identifying those aspects that can be reinterpreted in light of Christian revelation. This requires a dialogical approach that involves both theological reflection and cultural sensitivity, allowing the Church to respond effectively to the lived realities of its members.

The persistence of *mburi cia kiama* rituals among PCMF

members, therefore, highlights the need for a contextualized model of Christian spirituality that integrates cultural identity with theological integrity. By examining the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of these rituals, this study seeks to contribute to the development of such a model. In doing so, it addresses a critical gap in African Christian theology and offers practical insights for the PCEA in its mission to nurture spiritually grounded and culturally authentic believers.

3. Statement of the Problem

The continued participation of Presbyterian Church Men Fellowship (PCMF) members in *mburi cia kiama* rituals presents a significant theological and spiritual challenge to the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA). While the Church upholds spirituality grounded in Christian rites such as baptism, confirmation, and ordination, engagement in traditional rituals introduces a tension that reflects competing religious identities. This dual participation raises concerns regarding the coherence, authenticity, and integrity of Presbyterian spirituality among its adherents.

Despite the persistence of this phenomenon, there is limited scholarly inquiry into how the symbolic and spiritual elements of *mburi cia kiama* rituals may be critically engaged through inculturation. In particular, there is a lack of contextual theological frameworks that demonstrate how these rituals can be reinterpreted to complement, rather than contradict, Christian spirituality. Consequently, the absence of structured theological engagement has contributed to uncritical participation, fostering a fragmented expression of faith among PCMF members.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining the potential for inculturation as a means of integrating meaningful cultural elements into Christian spirituality while safeguarding doctrinal integrity.

4. Research Question

How can the symbolism in *mburi cia kiama* rituals be inculturated to enhance the spirituality of PCMF members?

5. Literature Review

A. Theoretical Perspective

This study is anchored in Victor Turner’s theory of ritual symbolism, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the transformative nature of rituals within human societies. Turner (1969) conceptualizes rituals as dynamic processes that unfold through three key stages: separation, liminality, and reintegration. In the stage of separation, individuals are detached from their previous social status; during liminality, they exist in a transitional state characterized by ambiguity and transformation; and finally, reintegration marks their incorporation into a new social and spiritual identity.

Within this framework, rituals are not merely ceremonial acts but powerful mechanisms that shape identity, reinforce communal values, and facilitate spiritual consciousness. Turner (1969) further argues that ritual symbols function as condensed

expressions of complex cultural meanings, embodying both social norms and spiritual realities. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant to the study of *mburi cia kiama* rituals, as it allows for a deeper interpretation of their symbolic content and transformative purpose within the Agikuyu community.

Applying Turner's theory to the present study provides a basis for understanding how traditional rituals can be reinterpreted and recontextualized within Christian practice. It enables a critical analysis of how the stages of transformation in *mburi cia kiama* rituals parallel processes of spiritual formation in Christianity, thereby offering a foundation for inculturation. Consequently, this framework supports the argument that ritual symbolism, when critically engaged, can serve as a bridge between indigenous religious expressions and Christian spirituality.

B. Empirical Literature

African scholars have consistently emphasized the centrality of ritual in shaping spiritual identity within African contexts. Mbiti (1969) asserts that African spirituality is inherently communal and is expressed through rituals that integrate the individual into the wider community and the spiritual world. Similarly, Mugambi (1991) highlights that African religious consciousness is deeply embedded in cultural practices, where rituals serve as key vehicles for transmitting values, beliefs, and moral frameworks.

Studies on inculturation further underscore the importance of engaging cultural practices within the Christian theological framework. Shorter (1988) argues that the gospel must be incarnated within local cultures in order to be meaningful and transformative. This process involves a critical dialogue between faith and culture, where elements of traditional practices are discerned, purified, and integrated into Christian life. In the same vein, Gichure (2008) emphasizes that inculturation is essential for the development of an authentic African Christianity that resonates with the lived experiences of believers.

Empirical studies have also demonstrated that ritual symbols such as sacrifice, communal meals, rites of passage, and sacred objects, play a significant role in shaping spiritual identity and communal belonging (Magesa, 2004). These symbols are not only culturally meaningful but also possess deep spiritual resonance that can enhance religious experience when appropriately contextualized. Within Christian practice, similar symbolic elements are evident in sacraments such as the Eucharist and rites of initiation, suggesting potential points of convergence between African traditional rituals and Christian spirituality.

Drawing from the findings of the present study, it is evident that the symbolic components of *mburi cia kiama* rituals, particularly those related to sacrifice, communal participation, and identity formation, closely align with key aspects of Christian spirituality. However, the absence of structured theological engagement has led to their uncritical appropriation, often resulting in dual religious allegiance among PCMF members. This highlights the need for a deliberate and informed process of inculturation that seeks to reinterpret these symbols

within a Christian framework.

Overall, the reviewed literature points to a convergence between African ritual practices and Christian spirituality, while also emphasizing the necessity of theological discernment. It affirms that inculturation provides a viable pathway for integrating culturally significant practices into Christian life, thereby fostering a more holistic and contextually grounded expression of faith.

6. Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the inculturation of *mburi cia kiama* rituals and their influence on the spirituality of Presbyterian Church Men Fellowship (PCMF) members. The use of a mixed-methods approach was deemed appropriate as it enabled the researcher to triangulate data, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings through the convergence of multiple data sources.

The study was conducted among PCMF members within the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), with a total sample size of 606 respondents. This sample provided a broad and representative perspective of men who are actively involved in church life while also engaging, to varying degrees, with traditional practices. Data were collected using a combination of research instruments, including structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and observation guides. Questionnaires were primarily used to gather quantitative data on patterns of participation, perceptions, and attitudes toward *mburi cia kiama* rituals. Semi-structured interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, beliefs, and interpretations of the rituals in relation to their Christian faith. Observation guides were utilized to capture contextual and behavioral aspects of ritual participation, thereby enriching the qualitative data.

A variety of sampling techniques were employed to ensure both representativeness and depth of insight. Stratified sampling was used to categorize respondents based on relevant characteristics such as church leadership roles and levels of participation in PCMF activities. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of key informants, including church leaders and elders, who possessed critical knowledge of both Christian practices and traditional rituals. Random sampling ensured that the broader population of PCMF members was fairly represented, while snowball sampling facilitated access to participants who were actively involved in *mburi cia kiama* rituals but might not be easily identifiable through formal church structures.

Data analysis was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), allowing for the identification of patterns, frequencies, and relationships among variables. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and observations were analyzed thematically, with emerging themes systematically categorized and interpreted in relation to the study objectives. This analytical approach

enabled the researcher to capture both measurable trends and deeper meanings associated with ritual practices and spirituality.

7. Findings of the Study

The findings of the study reveal a complex and dynamic relationship between *mburi cia kiama* rituals and the spirituality of PCMF members. First, the study established that ritual symbolism plays a significant role in shaping the spiritual experiences of participants. Elements embedded within *mburi cia kiama* rituals, such as sacrifice, rites of passage, and symbolic acts, were found to carry deep spiritual meaning, influencing participants' sense of identity, belonging, and moral responsibility.

Secondly, the study found that key components of these rituals, including communal participation, shared meals, and the use of symbolic objects, resonate strongly with aspects of Christian spiritual practice. Participants often drew parallels between traditional rituals and Christian expressions such as fellowship, sacramental life, and spiritual formation. This suggests that there exists a significant degree of compatibility at the level of symbolic meaning, even where doctrinal differences persist.

Thirdly, the findings indicate that many respondents perceive a relative deficiency in the experiential and symbolic richness of Presbyterian rituals when compared to *mburi cia kiama* practices. While Christian rites such as confirmation and ordination are recognized as important, they were often described as less engaging in terms of communal participation and symbolic depth. This perceived gap has contributed to the continued attraction of traditional rituals, which are viewed as more holistic in addressing social, cultural, and spiritual needs.

Finally, the study demonstrates that corrective inculturation offers a viable pathway for addressing this tension. By intentionally integrating meaningful symbolic elements from *mburi cia kiama* rituals into Christian practices, the Church can enhance spiritual vitality and foster a more contextually relevant expression of faith. Such an approach would not only affirm cultural identity but also strengthen the spiritual formation of PCMF members within a theologically grounded framework.

Overall, the findings underscore the need for a deliberate and structured engagement with cultural practices, moving beyond rejection towards a transformative process of inculturation that enriches Christian spirituality while maintaining doctrinal integrity.

8. Conclusion

This study concludes that inculturation is not only necessary but also indispensable for the meaningful contextualization of Christianity within the African setting. The persistence of *mburi cia kiama* rituals among Presbyterian Church Men Fellowship (PCMF) members demonstrates that cultural identity and religious expression are deeply intertwined, and cannot be addressed through simplistic rejection or condemnation. Rather, these findings point to the need for a constructive

theological engagement that recognizes the enduring significance of indigenous practices in shaping spiritual consciousness.

The study has shown that *mburi cia kiama* rituals embody rich symbolic elements, such as sacrifice, communal belonging, moral responsibility, and rites of passage, which resonate with key dimensions of Christian spirituality. These elements, when critically examined, reveal significant points of convergence with Christian theological concepts, including fellowship, spiritual transformation, and covenantal identity. However, the absence of a deliberate and structured approach to engaging these cultural practices has resulted in uncritical participation and the emergence of dual religious identities among PCMF members.

In light of these findings, the study affirms that inculturation offers a viable and transformative pathway for bridging the gap between Christian faith and African cultural realities. A carefully developed model of corrective inculturation can enable the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) to reinterpret and integrate meaningful cultural symbols into its liturgical and spiritual life without compromising doctrinal integrity. Such an approach would not only enhance the authenticity and relevance of Christian spirituality but also foster a more holistic and integrated faith experience among believers.

Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of moving beyond a dichotomous understanding of Christianity and African Traditional Religion towards a dialogical and integrative approach. By doing so, the Church can more effectively fulfill its mission in a culturally diverse and religiously dynamic context, nurturing a spirituality that is both authentically Christian and genuinely African.

9. Recommendations

In view of the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are proposed to guide the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) and other stakeholders in addressing the relationship between *mburi cia kiama* rituals and Christian spirituality:

First, there is a need to develop a structured and theologically grounded model of corrective inculturation within PCEA liturgy and practice. Such a model should provide clear guidelines on how culturally significant symbols and practices can be critically evaluated, reinterpreted, and integrated into Christian worship and spiritual formation.

Second, the Church should enhance the symbolic and participatory dimensions of its existing rituals, particularly confirmation and ordination. By enriching these rites with meaningful expressions of community, identity, and spiritual transformation, the Church can respond more effectively to the experiential and spiritual needs of its members.

Third, theological education and training on inculturation should be promoted among church leaders, ministers, and lay leaders. This will equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to engage cultural practices critically and pastorally, thereby avoiding both uncritical acceptance and outright rejection.

Fourth, the Church should foster intentional dialogue between ecclesiastical authorities and cultural leaders, including elders within the *kiama* system. Such engagement can create mutual understanding and open avenues for collaboration in addressing issues of spirituality, identity, and moral formation within the community.

Fifth, further research should be encouraged to explore the broader implications of inculturation across different cultural contexts within the Church. Comparative studies can provide deeper insights into how African Christian spirituality can be enriched through culturally grounded theological approaches.

By implementing these recommendations, the PCEA can move towards a more contextualized and transformative expression of Christian faith, one that affirms cultural identity while remaining firmly rooted in biblical and theological foundations.

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