

Contextualization of the Christian Gospel in Kenya: A Case of Tharaka Community

Moses KirimiNjunjo (MA)
A PhD Student, Chuka University

Dr. Dickson Nkongekagema (PhD),
Senior Lecturer, Department of Humanities, Chuka University

Dr. David Nyaga Bururia (PhD),
Senior Lecturer Department of Humanities, Chuka University

Abstract

It is indisputable that the success of Christian mission lies in the ability to make the gospel of Jesus Christ incarnate in every culture where it is preached. The early church was aware of this fact and used this approach to spread the gospel in the Roman Empire. However, those who introduced Christianity in its present form in Africa, and indeed in Tharaka, were by and large indifferent to the African culture and hence condemned it. While there is a growing outcry to take cognizance of the culture in which the gospel is being preached to, exactly how this should be done is an ongoing debate. This paper recognizes that contextualization of the gospel at the surface level is an ongoing process; there is need for critical contextualization at the theological level to make the gospel relevant. The significance of critical contextualization of the gospel in Tharaka so that it becomes relevant to the Tharaka people is discussed.

Keywords: Kenya; Tharaka Community; Contextualization, Christian Gospel

INTRODUCTION

Contextualization has been defined in different ways. Langmead (1998) says that contextualization refers to the progressive process of critical and dynamic interaction between faith and culture, while Cole (1998) defines it as a theological formulation from exegesis of biblical texts within a socio – cultural context, utilizing the Bible as the only authority while recognizing the progress of progressive revelation. In these two definitions, there is an interaction of culture with God's word in such a way that local theology is born. In this paper, we look at contextualization as the process of making the Gospel of Jesus Christ relevant in any given culture by recognizing the uniqueness of every culture and the universality of the gospel. The term contextualization and inculturation are widely used by the Roman Catholic Church while contextualization is widely used within the evangelical circles. Contextualization is a brain child of S. Cole and Sharon Sapseziah. This was in the early 1970s within the framework of the World Council of Churches (WCC) (Cole, 1998).

There is great significance in contextualization due to the following reasons: Firstly, there is cultural diversity in this world and culture has a place in shaping humanity. Therefore, the gospel needs to be sensitive to the context in which the word of God is shared (Shaw, 1995). Secondly, Jesus Christ becomes a perfect example of the significance of contextualization. For being God, he took flesh, lived in the Jewish culture and transformed it (Langmead, 1998). Contextualization therefore makes it possible to meet people where they are with the message of Jesus Christ using their experience of reality as a tool of evangelism hence making the gospel relevant to them. This paper looked at the efforts made by the Evangelical Churches to make the gospel relevant to the Tharaka people of Kenya.

APPROACHES TO CONTEXTUALIZATION

Different approaches have been used in contextualization. There are some who have rejected every cultural aspect of the target audience considering them discontinuous with the Christian faith. Like Tertulian, they argue there is no relationship between Jerusalem and Athens (Shaw, 1995). This approach to us is inappropriate as there is beauty in every culture and some aspects that are continuous with biblical Christianity are present in every culture. For example, the value of family and communalism among African culture. This approach is again inappropriate as it merely condemns culture believing that there is a Christian culture. It misses out on the fact that the gospel cannot be preached in a vacuum. The second approach takes everything in a culture and fuses it with the Christian faith (Shaw, 1998). This approach too fails to recognize that not everything in a given culture is continuous with biblical revelation. Additionally, this approach leads to syncretism. The third approach is what Paul G. Hiebert calls 'Critical contextualization'. This approach recognizes the goodness in every culture as well as flaws inherent in these cultures (Hiebert, 1982). So it seeks to conserve the good in every culture and use aspects in a culture as a bridge of faith (Shaw, 1995). This approach avoids the extremity of the two former approaches hence leading to production of local theologies. Properly done, contextualization meets individuals

where they are; leads Christians to become what God intended them to be and challenges believers to live their new found faith within their cultural contexts. We will be investigating the approaches that Churches in Tharaka have used to reach the Tharaka people.

Church history reveals that contextualization is as old as the Christian faith though the term itself came into use in the twentieth century. The first church controversy recorded in Acts of the Apostles deals with a cultural problem; whether the gentile converts to the Christian faith are obliged to embrace Jewish ways to become Christians. The first Jerusalem council recorded in Acts 15 recognizes the uniqueness in culture and passes that the gentile converts should not be forced to observe Jewish laws such as circumcision to become Christians. Thus, the missionaries' practices should not be imposed on the Gentile church. Paul's approach in mission too demonstrated that he was sensitive to the recipients' culture. To a Jewish audience, Paul extensively quoted from the Old Testament while to a Gentile audience, he appealed to general revelation (Acts 13: 14-41, 17:2-4, 14:15-17, 17:16-31). In 1 Corinthians 9:20-23, Paul reveals his mission principle: to the Jews he became a Jew and to the Gentiles, he became a Gentile. This does not mean that he compromised; rather, Paul was flexible enough in his approach to mission by varying it according to the audience.

This sensitivity to the receptors' culture was nevertheless not employed always in church history. The 19th and 20th century missionary enterprise in Africa showed little sensitivity to the African culture. The Western missionaries and those that embraced Western theology tended to ignore African culture and religion damning them heathen, uncivilized and evil. Consequentially, they urged their members to totally abandon these cultures as a mark of embracing Christian discipleship (Mugambi, 1989; Nthamburi; 2000). Regarding this, Hiebert notes that neglecting the worldview aspects in which the gospel is being preached to, causes converts to retreat to their pre-Christian beliefs and practices (Hiebert, 1982). Salala (1989) too informs us that when Western missionaries ignored African worldview in introducing Christianity in Africa, the effect was emergence of superficial Christianity, a kind of Christianity that did not affect the total person. This is a Christianity which is dualistic in nature where one confesses Christianity on the outside and yet visits a diviner and medicine man at night. As we shall see this is the mistake that the early Christian missionaries in Tharaka did in 1940s and after when they came to evangelize the Tharaka community. All is however not lost as contextualization can be employed to make the gospel of Christ part of the Tharaka people.

EVANGELIZATION OF THE THARAKA COMMUNITY

The Tharaka are Eastern Bantu speaking people currently living in the semi-arid part of Tharaka Nithi County. They are part of the nine sub-tribes of the Ameru namely Miitine, Igoji, Imenti, Tigania, Igembe, Chuka, Muthambi and Mwimbi (Fandiman, 2016). Like the rest of the Meru, the Tharaka say that they came from Mboa island where they had lived peacefully before *Nguo Ntume* (Red people) colonized them (Rimita, 1988). The missionaries took longer to arrive and proclaim the gospel among the Tharaka people. Issues of insecurity and accessibility due to poor means of transport among others may have contributed to this delay. The Consolata Fathers of the Roman Catholic Church were the first missionary group to arrive in Tharaka in 1948 (Muthomi:OI:12:11:2017). They built a centre in Matiri where a hospital was also constructed (Muthomi:OI:12:11:2016). The RCC has constructed schools and hospitals in Tharaka and have been involved in community development, something which has also aided their evangelization in Tharaka (The Tharaka of Kenya, 1994).

The first evangelical group to proclaim the gospel in Tharaka was the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA). The PCEA started its mission work in Kajiampau in Chuka-Igamba Ng'ombe area in 1949 (Kamwara:OI:12:11:2017). The first missionaries to Tharaka were Africans from Chuka-Mwimbi area. Among the early missionaries were Amos Magati from Chuka, M'maguta from Kĩrũmi and Ezekiel Kanampiũ (Kamwara, 2017). Other key missionaries were Joses Kathendu from Kĩrĩndĩni, Julius M'ngombe who was an evangelist, Julius Ngaara from Chuka who too was an evangelist, Raphael M'nthaka, a catechist from Chogoria and Jediel Micheu, a Church minister from Chogoria. These missionaries came at different times; some staying a little longer than others (Kamwara, 2017). They travelled long distances as they conducted door to door evangelism (Kamwara, 2017). Also, PCEA established Kajiampau primary school where an elementary school was established. There, the converts were taught elementary reading. Though PCEA was the earliest evangelical group to arrive in Tharaka, its numerical growth has not been impressive due to lack of ministers (there is one ordained minister in Tharaka for now) and the area is still considered a missionary zone (Kamwara:OI:12:11:2012).

The Methodist Church in Kenya (MCK) on the other hand, was introduced in Tharaka by a missionary from England called Frederick Wilmot Valender at Marimanti in 1958 (Njagi:20:08:2017). Different ways were used by Methodist missionaries to reach out to the Tharaka people. One way was by giving them incentives such as clothes and other gifts. They would bring sugar and tea leaves to the people while the people would provide milk for preparing tea (Njagi: OI: 20:08:2017). They also introduced elementary schools which made those who joined them know how to read and write and therefore they were also able to read the Bible (Njagi:OI:20:08:2017). They also preached the gospel from place to place in Tharaka (Njagi:OI:20:08:2017). It

is the lay people who had been converted to the faith who mainly were used to spread the gospel to other parts of Tharaka. These evangelists were later trained and became ministers availing many workers to serve in MCK in Tharaka and hence contributing to its growth (Njagi:OI:20:08:2017). Currently, MCK has seven circuits in Tharaka alone (Njagi: OI: 20:08:2017).

The work of evangelization in Tharaka expanded a lot with the coming of Pentecostal Churches in Tharaka. The Full Gospel Church of Kenya was the first Pentecostal Church in Tharaka. In 1963, FGCK came to Tharaka under the leadership of Stephen Munyua who had been sent by Matirecah, a missionary from Finland, then serving in Laikipia (Njagi:FGD:20:08: 2017). Maturū, Philip Kithetu and Taratisio Murugaara were among the first converts in Tharaka (Njagi:FGD:20:08:2017). These three greatly assisted Stephen Munyua in the evangelization of Tharaka. The first branch that was opened was Tunyai by Maturū in 1963. People's conversion was very slow as Christianity was perceived as something foreign and winning a single person to the Christian faith was considered a great achievement (Njagi:FGD:20:08:2017). With time, other branches were opened including Rūngū, Kibūng'a, Gatūnga, Makutano and Kithiori (Njagi:FGD:20:08:2017). The mode of evangelism used was mainly door to door and was done with much fear (Njagi:FGD:20:08:2017). Provision of medical care as well as giving clothes, money and other incentives were used (Njagi:FGD:20:08:2017).

The coming of East Africa Pentecostal Church (EAPC) contributed the most in the evangelization of Tharaka (The Tharaka of Kenya, 1994). EAPC was introduced in Tharaka in 1964 by Evangelist Kaunga Gabriel at Giampondo (Rwanda:OI:29:10:2017). Evangelist Kaunga hailed from Tharaka and had become a Christian while in Mombasa. He was assisted by Njeru, who hailed from Embu (Rwanda: OI: 29:10:2017). Kaunga's work was to preach the gospel from door to door and open Churches while Njeru would baptize and do pastoral work (Rwanda: FGD: 20:08:2017). The EAPC came with a lot of charisma. God accompanied the proclamation of the gospel with signs and wonders: many who were sick were healed; those who had been bewitched were delivered and some witches even brought their artifacts including horns (*ngochi*) to be burnt upon conversion (Rwanda:OI:29:10:2017). Such manifestations of the move of God as well as the fact that the missionaries were a good example furthered the gospel (Rwanda, 2017). Even some of those that had joined FGCK left and joined EAPC (Njagi:FGD:20:08:2017).

Though FGCK and EAPC are Pentecostals, the EAPC attracted more people in Tharaka. The EAPC recruited many mission workers in the mission field and paid them hence ensuring that many got the message of Christ (Njagi:FGD:20:08:2017; Rwanda:OI:29:10:2017). FGCK on the other hand, had very few workers who served as ministers and they often had no salaries. This hindered efficiency in the delivery of the message (Njagi:FGD:20:08:2017). Further, FGCK was firstly selective in their evangelism. They targeted local leaders who were perceived as people of influence in society. These included people like clan leaders and elders (Njagi:FGD:20:08:2017). Persuading such, took longer and thus slowed down evangelism (Njagi:FGD:20:08:2017). EAPC however, was not selective in its outreach. It targeted all and sundry and as such, was able to reach out to masses and spread faster (Njagi:FGD:20:08:2017). In fact, EAPC has the largest number of pastors in Tharaka and is the largest with 105 pastors and 9,500 members (Rwanda:OI:29:10: 2017).

Other churches continued to be established in Tharaka soon after independence. The African Inland Church was started in Tharaka in 1965 at Tunyai by Pastor Ndauti Muriungi Nguũ from Thagichu (Karuri: OI: 23:08: 2017). He was soon followed by Pastor Philip Matoro from Kangundo. The second centre to be opened was Nkondi and soon, others followed (Karuri OI: 23: 08: 2017). Door to door evangelism was also the main means of evangelism (Karuri: OI: 23:08: 2017). In 1975, the Church of the Province of Kenya (now Anglican Church of Kenya) opened a branch at Kithinge together with a primary school and around 59 members were enrolled (Nkonge, 2016). In 1975, a primary school and congregation were also started in Twamikua in Chuka-Igambang'ombe (Nkonge, 2016). Though other congregations were gradually founded in places like Nkondi, Marimanti and even Tunyai, the growth too has been slow due to leadership problems as well as reluctance of members to reach out to others (Njoroge:OI:30:09: 2017). The Redeemed Gospel Church was started in 1992 at Rūngū but closed shortly after (Kabuitu: FGD: 27: 08: 2017). The work was revived when Pastor Kabuitu opened RGC in Nkondi in 1999 and from then on, RGC has grown steadily in Tharaka (Kabuitu:FGD:27:08: 2017). Charismatic and independent Churches have also mushroomed in Tharaka contributing to rapid spread of Christianity. Currently, over 90% of Tharaka people are confessing Christians (Kabuitu:FGD:27:08: 2017).

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED IN PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL AMONG THE THARAKA COMMUNITY

One key thing that the missionaries, whether Europeans or Africans did in the proclamation of the gospel in Tharaka was that they needed to get rid of their traditional way of life in order to become Christians (Rwanda, 2017). These preachers attacked and criticized Tharaka ways such as visiting medicine men to seek their help (*kūragūrūwa*), visiting diviners (*Kūringirua Mbūgū*) 'swallowing' by *Kirimo* (*Kirimo is a mythical creature that is believed to 'swallow' boys before undergoing the rite of initiation. Every Tharaka boy must go through this ritual*), Female circumcision and polygamy (Kamwara: OI:12:11:2017; Njagi OI: 20:08:2017; Rwanda:OI:29:10:

2017). The rite of *Kĩrimo* was very much condemned by these preachers of the gospel in Tharaka. The preachers even went to an extent of talking about *Kĩrimo* in the open. At one point, a convert went to Chiakariga market and said that there was nothing like *Kĩrimo*. He said that “*Kirimow* was not a one-legged animal as had been claimed but just a person who carried a long wooden thing which was then said to be *Kĩrimo*”. The man even mimicked the noise made by *Kĩrimo* (Njagi:OI:20:08: 2017).

This open condemnation of the treasured ways of the Tharaka by Christians was not taken lightly. It made many Tharaka people have a low opinion of Christianity. They saw it as an enemy that was bent on destroying their culture and thus needed to be fought (Njagi:OI:20:08: 2017). Revealing the secrets of *Kĩrimo* even before women and children indeed was humiliating and unacceptable to the ‘swallowed’ (*Rugũ*).

Open hostility towards Christians was therefore common. When Christians went to share the gospel in somebody’s house, they would sometimes be beaten or chased away (Rwanda:OI:29:10: 2017). At one point, there was an open fight between believers and unbelievers. This is when Christians were accused of revealing the secret of *Kĩrimo* to women and so, the *rugũ* (swallowed young people) went and destroyed the Church structure that was under construction at night and spread rumors that *Kĩrimo* had ‘swallowed’ the structure (Rwanda:OI:29:10: 2017).

The introduction of Western culture alongside the Christian faith was also offensive to the Tharaka people. One was the introduction of clothes by these Western missionaries. The introduction of these wear was not impressive as the Tharaka were content to wear clothes made from hides as they were used to. They did not want this way of dressing replaced with a foreign way. This too was perceived as a threat to the Tharaka culture (Kamwara:OI:12:11: 2017). Winning converts to the faith was not easy. The Maumau movement (freedom fighters) was on when Christianity came to Tharaka and so, the Maumau fighters discouraged people from becoming Christians (Kamwara, 2017). They wanted people to join them by becoming members of *Kĩama* (resistant movement) and so, becoming a Christian was perceived as joining the camp of the enemy. Further, to tell people to leave their traditions was not easy. Few would thus be willing to do so (Njagi:FGD::20:08: 2017).

Communication too was a challenge. There was poor means of transport as the roads were at most impassable, with shrubs and bushes everywhere, rendering some places unsafe to go (Kamwara:OI:12:11: 2017). People would walk for long distances on foot and so this was very tedious. Only few places would at first be accessible (Kamwara: OI: 12:11: 2017). The bridges to connect one point with another too were sometimes not there and so making some places inaccessible. There was also language problem. Some missionaries who came to Tharaka found it difficult to preach as the Tharaka people could sometimes not understand what the missionaries were saying (Kamwara, 2017). At most, there were no translators and no written material in Kitharaka (Kamwara:OI:12:11: 2017). There were other challenges faced by these early missionaries to Tharaka. Some missionaries who were pioneers of PCEA mission work in Tharaka came from Mwimbi. Since the people of Tharaka (Mũtino area) who bordered Mwimbi constantly had wrangles with the Mwimbi people, there was mistrust when some Christians from Mwimbi came to preach at Kajiampau which is in Mutino area (Kamwara:OI:12:11:2017). Very few missionaries outside Tharaka community were willing to come and evangelize there as many feared witchcraft, diseases and attack from wild animals.

In conclusion, one notes that the evangelicals at most displayed a condemnatory attitude towards the Tharaka way of life. By openly condemning the Tharaka beliefs and practices, they failed to take account of the feelings of the Tharaka people who perceived them as enemies of their culture. Moreso, the evangelicals did not take time to reflect on the reasons behind the Tharaka way of life and use the gospel to speak to these realities, that is, allow the gospel to speak to the reality or the world of the Tharaka people hence making it irrelevant to them. Thus, the conflict interplay between the Tharaka traditional worldview and the Christian faith was downplayed. Despite this major weakness on the part of evangelicals, the evangelical Churches have continued to grow to date though some evangelical converts still hold on to the Tharaka traditional beliefs and practices which evangelicals preach against. In the light of all this then, this study investigated how Christianity in Tharaka can be made more relevant to the Tharaka community.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE GOSPEL IN THARAKA

This study borrowed from the theory of Shaw(1995) who informs us that contextualization of the gospel is at two levels namely the surface level and theological level.

Contextualization at the Surface Level

In the face-to-face interviews, the 12 pastors stated that contextualization of the gospel at the surface level was ongoing. The 16 respondents in the FGD had also a similar response. Thus 100% of these respondents indicated that there was attempt to contextualize the gospel. Karuri (2017) noted that the New Testament had already been translated into Kitharaka and was in circulation. People were really enjoying reading God’s word in their own mother tongue. Nevertheless, the Old Testament was not yet in circulation. The translation hence made it easy for them to understand the Bible better than relying on the Imenti or Kikuyu translation of the Bible. A wider

audience too is able to access and read the Bible for themselves.

There were other ways in which contextualization at the surface level was taking place. Njagi:OI:20: (2018) pointed out that in their evangelistic work; they use traditional tunes, costumes and instruments to communicate the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They replace the lyrics of the traditional songs with lyrics taken from Holy Scriptures but retain the dancing style and tune. As the crowd identifies and enjoys the songs, they are drawn to the message of Jesus Christ. For him, it was possible to praise Jesus Christ using traditional songs and tunes.

As regards this point, Shaw (1995) observes that many cultural forms such as drums, music, art, drama and dance are medium that can be used to express the message of Christianity. What he is saying is that it is possible to use traditional forms redemptively to advance the kingdom. Using Tharaka traditional songs to pass a biblical message shows attempt to use that medium in a new way; advancing the kingdom. Basically, this is an acceptable way so long as it is done with moderation and in light of Scriptural truth.

In the FGDs, several contributions were made in respect to contextualization. Muthini (FGD: 20: 08: 2017) stated that the use of *Kitharaka* songs in worship was impressive. This is because they felt Christianity could be expressed in their own mother tongue. In a like manner, Nyaga (FGD: 27: 08:2017) asserted that the traditional songs such as *authi*, *nchũngo* and *mboboi* involved use of vigorous dancing. This vigorous dancing had found expression in worship especially in Pentecostal and charismatic circles in Tharaka. This preserves the vitality and beauty in this form. Karani (FGD: 20: 08: 2017) asserted that in many congregations, preaching was done in *Kitharaka* and where this was not so, preaching was done in Kiswahili and English. Where this was so noted, there was normally a person to translate in *Kitharaka* where need be. Like Njagi earlier on noted, these three respondents recognized that evangelicals in Tharaka were using traditional forms as a media to communicate the gospel.

Mwangi (FGD: 20: 08: 2017) remarked that some churches had introduced a programme for the rite of passage for boys. There was a centre where willing parents brought their boys to be initiated as well as receive biblical instructions as they transitioned to the next stage. Alternatively, the church encouraged parents who wanted to initiate their boys into manhood not to involve *authi* (traditional singers who sing at the initiates home in the evening of the eve of the ceremony and during the ceremony) in the occasion; instead, they should inform the church's leadership so that the church can come and spend the night singing to God and praying before the initiation day. Mutembei (FGD: 20: 08: 2017) also noted that the church in Tharaka supported *ntanĩranamũgambo* (a self-awareness rite for girls) where instead of girls going through FGM, they were brought together and taught life skills and other relevant issues to the girl child. The respondents revealed that there was an attempt to give initiation as a rite of passage Christian meaning. The problem evangelicals find in the rite is the way the rite of passage is conducted. The rite involves the use of mystical power. The initiator (*mũtani*) uses magical power to protect himself against the jealous of other initiators. These magical powers are also used to ensure that the initiate does not feel pain during the act. The initiation ground (*kĩgĩrĩ*) too is surrounded by these magical powers to guard against malicious witches. The songs that are sung also may contain obscene lyrics that evangelicals consider unfit for a believer. So, retaining the rite by giving it a Christian meaning preserves the positive aspect in the rite for example, instilling a sense of responsibility and morality.

The question as to whether the rite of *Kũmerua ĩ kĩrimo* ('swallowing' by *kĩrimo*) could be given a Christian meaning was also discussed. This discussion was important because firstly, Finifrock and Katheruya (2009) had written about this rite and urged believers to completely reject it. Secondly, the rite was still popular among some parts in Tharaka. A respondent shared a recent case in which he and another team had gone for an evangelistic meeting in one of the areas where this rite of 'swallowing' was rampant. He noted that on a Sunday service, he attacked the rite of 'swallowing' as he preached. One of the elders left the pew, grabbed him and almost knocked him down. He later learnt that the elder was the *Kĩrimo* of the area. By this I mean that he was the one who was in charge of keeping *kĩrimo* and blowing the horn announcing the presence of *kĩrimo* in order to scare those not 'swallowed'. For him to assume this responsibility, he needed to be in possession of magical powers so that he would be invisible to the '*Nkara*' (those not 'swallowed'). In one of the FGD where this issue was particularly discussed, 2(25%) were of the opinion that the rite should be given some Christian meaning. Their reasoning was that not everything about the rite was bad. For example, the virtue of courage, being secretive and respect for the elderly were instilled. On the other hand, 6(75%) of the respondents in that same FGD felt that the rite of 'swallowing' by *kĩrimo* needed to be done away with completely. The rite could not be Christianized. Kabuitu (FGD: 27: 08: 2017) observed that there had been an attempt to 'Christianize' *kĩrimo* calling it 'Holy *kĩrimo*' but the attempt failed terribly. Several reasons were given to oppose giving the rite a Christian meaning. First, at the very root of the rite is the use of magical power. There is the use of *mũtheega* (medicine) to ensure that the one blowing the horn to announce the presence of *kĩrimo* is invisible. Secondly, the initiates are encouraged to tell lies about the identity of *Kĩrimo* to the un-initiated especially women to cause fear. Thirdly, the rite involves taking an oath of allegiance to *Kĩrimo*, singing songs of praise to *Kĩrimo* which often have obscene lyrics, giving a goat to be eaten by the attendants, merciless beating of boys as well as

embarrassing them and making them even publicly confess what they have not done. It was felt that the rite had elements of religion including worship, sacrifice and paying allegiance to *Kĩrimo*. As one of the participant noted, the rite needed to be done away with as the children of Israel dealt with Baal.

There are good reasons to believe that the rite of ‘swallowing’ by *Kĩrimo* played a significant role in the Tharaka traditional setting. This is especially by instilling virtues such as courage, ability to endure and ability to keep a secret. These were needed to survive the hostile environment and the enemies that surrounded them (*maitha*). Since these virtues can be acquired in more friendly settings today such as schools and even Church, the rite may not be necessarily. That is why the rite has died in some parts of Tharaka. Meanwhile, the rite needs to be done away with since the role of the rite has been or can be substituted in the contemporary Tharaka community.

To sum up, there is indeed evidence of contextualization in Tharaka. This however, is at the surface level. Whereas this makes people feel that Christianity is not in a way foreign, it does not address the deep-seated questions of worldview of Tharaka people.

Contextualization at the Theological Level

The findings from this paper’s research revealed that there was little contextualization of the gospel at the theological level as compared to contextualization at the surface level. From the item in the questionnaire which sought to find out what could be done to make Christianity more attractive in Tharaka community and therefore make them grow more in the Lord, 75% of the respondents observed that there should be more regular and systematic teachings based on God’s word. This revealed that teaching of the gospel was not regularly done. Mostly it would be done when there are seminars or camps which are annual. What is handled then is rarely related to issues on persistence of Tharaka traditional worldview and how to address it.

All the pastors (100%) – involved in the FGD, and face – to – face interview – admitted that there was dire need for intensive Bible – based teachings among evangelicals in Tharaka. Katherya (FGD: 27: 08: 2017) saw continuous teaching of the word of God as a way of helping the members know the truth. He noted that the Bible recorded that God’s people perish because of lack of knowledge; so exposing the church to the word of God will ground them in the faith. Rwanda (OI:29:10:2017) asserted that since it is knowing and obeying God’s word that had helped him drop some unbiblical aspects of Tharaka traditional worldview which conflicted with biblical Christianity, resounding these truths faithfully through biblical teaching was all what was needed. Likewise, Mutugi (OI:01:17:18:2017) stated that there was an urgent need for sound teaching to counter teachings that promote aspects in the Tharaka traditional worldview regarded unbiblical. These include the man-centred approach to God evidenced in the prosperity gospel and believe that recurring suffering in the life of a believer is a result of a generational curse. Kabuitu (FGD: 27: 08: 2017) suggested that the only way to counter the Tharaka view of causation prevalent among believers was through presenting a biblical theodicy that recognizes the reality of suffering and at the same time upholds God’s sovereignty.

These respondents felt that the teaching ministry needed to be emphasized in Tharaka to make Christianity more relevant. This would imply that the teaching ministry among evangelicals in Tharaka was weak, though the church was growing numerically. The teaching ministry was therefore not strong enough to be able to meet the spiritual needs of the converts. Semenye(2006) renders support to these observations. She notes that in the 1960, the church in Africa was described as a mile long and an inch deep and not much had changed to date; Christianity was shallow though there were many professing Christians. It is this state that makes Oliver (1970) say that the church in Africa risks disintegrating at the centre while expanding at the circumference. Semenye consequently argues that there was need to examine the way the church nurtures Christians. The church in Africa needed Christian education to arrest this situation. This Christian education should be characterized by: teachers who are godly, mature in the word and theologically sound content that addresses real-life issues and appropriate methods of teachings based on age and ability of the learners (Semenye, 2006).

Commenting on Christian education as a ministry in the body of Christ, Downs (1994) states that Christian education aims at bringing the believer to maturity in Jesus Christ. This is by presenting biblical teaching anchored in theology but still recognizes the place of social sciences in understanding reality. Downs adds that since the Bible values the teaching ministry which has been neglected in the church today, the church must also value it (Downs, 1994). In the Old Testament, the goal of teaching was to enable the children of Israel learn God’s laws, put them into practice, and consequently through their life of obedience as they lived with other nations, it would be clear that indeed, they were God’s elect hence bring glory to God as brought out in Deuteronomy 4: 5 – 8. Teaching and learning as brought out in the Old Testament did not only involve the communication of information but also translating what is communicated into practice through living it out in the community; knowledge was so linked to actions so much that one could only claim to know something if he or she put it into practice (Downs, 1994).

In the New Testament, the gospel clearly indicates that the priority of the teaching ministry was central in the ministry of Jesus. This is brought out in various passages including the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5- 7),

teaching by the sea using parables (Mark 4: 1 – 33) and teaching on prayer (Luke 11: 1-13). No wonder his disciples called him Rabbi. Jesus similarly expected his disciples to consider the ministry of teaching central in the gospel proclamation as brought out in the great commission: the disciples were to teach all who would come to faith in Jesus Christ to obey all what Jesus Christ had instructed them (Matthew 28: 19 – 20). In this scripture, the new believers are to be baptized invoking the Trinity. Baptism would be an outward indicator of conversion (Romans 6: 1-6). After baptism, they have to be taught to obey Jesus' instructions as a way of growing into discipleship. Here again, as was the case in the Old Testament, the goal of teaching is obedience to the commands of God.

The apostles took Jesus' instructions seriously and so those who were saved during the day of Pentecost are said to have devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings (Acts 2: 42). The apostles too were not willing to give up the ministry of the word to serve tables; so, they appointed seven deacons (Acts 6:4) showing how the ministry of the word was central to them. Paul too considered the ministry of teaching central in his missionary work (Acts 18:11; 20: 20). At Corinth, Paul stayed for eighteen months teaching the word of God and in Ephesus, he taught God's word publicly and from house to house. Theologians agree that Paul's letters were situation – based: Paul gave teachings that were geared to respond to the situations that different churches were going through (Fee & Stuart, 1981). In his pastoral letters, Paul too encouraged Timothy and Titus to give priority to the ministry of the word (1 Timothy 4: 13, 16; Titus 2: 1).

Downs (1994) identifies Colossians 1: 25-29 as bringing out the ministry strategy of the apostle. Paul saw himself as a steward entrusted with a divine message and as a servant charged to proclaim this message. The content of his proclamation was the mystery and the mystery was Christ in them the hope of glory. The indwelling Christ in a believer's life gives meaning and purpose to life. Paul's method was to admonish and teach this message with the goal of helping believers grow to spiritual maturity. Since the mysteries of Christ were not easily understood, Paul's practice was to proclaim the gospel in a new territory and then remain to teach the converts the mystery of Christ so that their lives might be changed. This he did in a culturally sensitive way to make the gospel relevant to the people of that culture (Down, 1994).

The respondents in this study too noted that apart from biblical teaching, there was need for a holistic approach to the gospel and a call to work for unity in the body of Christ to make the gospel relevant. In response to the item that sought to evaluate how the gospel can be made more relevant in Tharaka to aid spiritual growth, 68.6% of the respondents cited that the gospel should not only address the spiritual needs of the members but also psychological, emotional, social and physical needs of the members. This would suggest that the presentation of the gospel was perceived as abstract and so it was not being applied to the real human context the respondents were living in.

This need for a holistic gospel also featured in the face-to-face interviews. Njagi (01: 20: 08: 2017) remarked that the gospel should address all areas of life: spiritual, emotional, social as well as economic. He added that it is impossible to minister to people who are hungry and so there is need to empower such people as well as reach out to them by meeting their needs. There should thus be a place for spiritual nurture through the word of God, a place to instill the virtue of hardwork and generosity too (Njagi: 01: 20: 08: 2017). Njagi too added that the gospel should be presented in a powerful way allowing God's presence to move, delivering the sick and those oppressed by the demonic. When people see such manifestation, they will not run to medicine men and diviners. Mutugi (01: 17: 08: 2017) had also a similar opinion. He attested to the fact that when God intervenes in human situations, for example, causing a woman who previously had stayed in marriage for fifteen years conceive as a result of prayer, people feel that Christian faith is a reality and such testimonies draw people to God. He added that if such happenings were regular, this would be a visible sign to the community of God's power and in a way, may draw people to God.

While the respondents' view that there was need to have a holistic presentation of the gospel is true, the whole problem seems to be a weakening in the teaching ministry. In the early church, we note that because the teaching ministry was strong, believers in obedience to what they had been taught, reached out to meet not only the spiritual needs but also social needs of people (Acts 2: 42 – 47, 4: 34 – 37). Writing about the rise of Christianity, Rodney (1996) asserts:

Therefore, as I conclude this study, I find it necessary to confront what appears to me to be the ultimate factor in the rise of Christianity... I believe that it was the religion's particular doctrines that permitted Christianity to be among the most sweeping and successful revitalization movement in history. And it was the way these doctrines took on actual flesh, the way they directed organizational actions and individual behaviour that led to the rise of Christianity.

What this simply means is that informed by what they were taught and living out these teachings in the community, made the early church not only grow numerically but also spiritually affecting those around them. Holistic ministry was anchored in proper teaching of the whole council of God. Even what Njagi and Mutugi were talking about, presenting the gospel of power, the gospel if well-presented has power in itself: to heal and

even to deliver (Romans 1: 16, 1 Corinthians 1: 18, Hebrews 4: 12). Unity too is possible if the word is taught in such a way that it leads to change of attitude and action. Then, the church will see itself as united in Christ not divided. So, what is generally needed is to emphasize on the teaching ministry among evangelicals in Tharaka. But what is the nature of this teaching?

Since the key problem this study focuses on is the persistence of Tharaka traditional worldview among evangelicals, there is need to teach with the aim of changing the attitude and behaviour of evangelicals to make them conform with biblical view as is brought out by evangelicals. The teachings therefore need to be relevant to the context. A local theology needs to be taught. Such a theology will not be ignorant of the middle zone nor of the needs of the people as the theory of the Flaw of the Excluded Middle indicates. This sensitivity should be evident even as the gospel is being presented to the community and even after, as believers are being nurtured to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

During evangelism, this study suggests that evangelicals in Tharaka should use aspects in Tharaka traditional worldview as a bridge of faith. Using the Tharaka worldview for example, that man is interested in seeking God because of what he or she wants, that is, temporal benefits God's desire to meet the greatest need of man should be presented. The gospel should be presented in such a way that people see the love of God: that is, it is he who actually is seeking human beings so that he can meet their need and their greatest need is being made right with him. One can appeal to the Tharaka community concept of evil: what is against the community and ancestor and that may make one a social misfit, to help capture how sin alienates one from God. There is need for them to see how an individual becomes a 'social misfit' before God and how God through Christ comes seeking out humanity so that the lost relationship can be restored. Just as the community longed to be at peace with ancestors, so through Christ, one can be at peace with God.

This paper suggests that evangelicals in Tharaka can use a model akin to the Tharaka initiation rite of passage in discipleship. The rite basically has three stages: initiation, seclusion and emergence. Initiation is not done in secrecy; the community is aware of who will go through adult initiation. The boy or girl who goes through the rite shows that he or she is ready to be an adult and the act ushers him or her into adulthood. The seclusion stage involves the initiate spending time receiving instructions on how to conduct himself or herself as an adult he or she has become. This is not done publicly but privately. Finally, the emergent stage is marked through a special celebration (*Mpumiro*) in which the person is welcomed into the community with the expectation that he or she shall be a useful member in the society and contribute in the welfare of the community. Just as in the New Testament converts into the Christian faith were first baptized (Acts 2:37-39, 16:30-33, 8:36-39), every convert should be baptized. This model, is equivalent to initiation. Baptism is a public confession that one has accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ and is willing to follow him. This should be public as a testimony to all just as initiation is in Tharaka community. Baptism is an outward indication of joining the family of faith just as initiation is an indicator of joining adulthood. Baptism should be followed by believers receiving instructions from mature Christians. These instructions should be based on the word of God so that they too can grow. These instructions should cover specific biblical themes fundamental to a Christian life and relevant to the Tharaka context.

The researchers suggest that the theme of the nature of God, his transcendence and immanence should be the first biblical teaching that these converts should receive. This has two basic objectives: to help the believer appreciate God's power and sovereignty and to help them seek a deeper relationship with him. God should be presented as transcendent, above and separate from creation. The believers should be helped to learn that God is powerful and his power control the affairs of this life. God's immanence should also be taught to help believers see that God is approachable. He is near them and willing to help them in their daily struggles if they invite him. God is seeking a relationship with them and so they should seek him. Through Christ, they can relate with this God. The teaching should be applied in the Tharaka traditional worldview. The doctrine should help deal with the fear of witchcraft, the Tharaka view of causation and anthropocentric worldview. Since God is powerful and sovereign, nothing can happen to a believer without his will. He is powerful to protect them from witches and there is no need for charms. Since God is near them, they can go to him for help and he will be there for them.

The second theme that should be taught is the identity of believers in Christ. The objective is to help them understand who they are in Christ and also to help them understand their responsibility. Believers should be taught in such a way that they realize that having Christ in them assures them of victory in this life. Just as Jesus conquered the spiritual forces of darkness and disarmed them, Christ's victory is their victory (Colossians 2:15, 1 John 4:4). In Christ, believers are priests and they have the freedom to approach God whom they have a relationship with. When believers understand their identity in Christ, they are able to pray for themselves, use their position to counter spiritual powers against God's will and any other fear including the fear of witchcraft.

Thirdly, the theme of hearing from God should be emphasized. The objective is to help believers learn to develop a relationship in Jesus Christ and help believers learn how to receive God's guidance for their lives daily. The centrality of scriptures in matters of faith and practice should be underscored as well as how to read God's word in order to hear him speak to the disciple of Jesus Christ on daily bases. The believer too should be

instructed on how to respond to God in prayer even as he or she listens to God's leading. The Tharaka people's belief that ancestors communicate to the living and the desire of individuals to hear from them as well as visiting diviners is rooted in a desire for guidance especially during crises: so, when disciples of Jesus are taught that God desires to speak to them and that they can hear him (Hebrews 1:1-2, John 10:27), their hunger to hear from the spiritual realm, finds fulfilment. If this is nurtured, disciples of Jesus Christ will learn to hear God even during crises.

These three fundamental themes if well taught to a disciple of Jesus Christ will help deal with the uncertainties of the future, for God who is transcendent is in control of human destiny. Believers can thus commit their future to God and trust his powerful hand and sovereignty. The three doctrines also address the present crises in life that is, the fear of witches, sickness, suffering and many others. Believers can put their faith in God's power, take their worries to him, claim their victory against spiritual forces and hear God's voice amidst storms of life. Finally, the doctrines also address the unknown of the past. This is especially through the doctrine of God who is transcendent and the identity of a believer in Jesus. In these three doctrines then, the middle zone, of spirits, demons and powers is not neglected and Christianity becomes relevant to the people of Tharaka as it will meet their needs. A biblical theodicy can also be presented to these converts as well as any other relevant teaching.

It is after a disciple has been instructed and demonstrated evidence of learning that he or she should graduate into the third stage. Just as when the seclusion stage was over the young boys were publicly released to exercise their role as adults, so after the period of instructions are over, believers should be allowed to serve in the community of believers and beyond. This is through using the gifts they have received to edify the body of Christ. This is how the process of discipleship should be practiced by evangelicals in Tharaka.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed contextualization of the gospel in Tharaka. The respondents recognized the need to make the gospel of Jesus Christ relevant among the Tharaka community. This was because though the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached by evangelicals in Tharaka for over sixty years, some evangelicals still hold on to aspects in Tharaka traditional worldview condemned by evangelicals. It was clear from the respondents that there was much attempt to contextualize the gospel at the surface level. This was through use of vernacular in worship, use of Tharaka traditional tunes and dances in music, giving some Tharaka rites such as initiation rite for boys a Christian meaning and use of New Testament Kitharaka Bible. There was however need for contextualization at the theological level. This would meet the need for teaching God's word which was highly sought after. Evangelism and discipleship should reflect sensitivity to Tharaka cosmology. A model akin to the stages in the initiation ceremony comprising of initiation, seclusion and emergence stage is suggested. This model recognizes the place of baptism, instruction and service for a disciple of Jesus Christ. Fundamental themes suggested are the nature of God, that is, his transcendent and immanent. Other themes include a believer's identity in Christ and hearing God's voice. These addresses the key concerns of The Flaw of the Excluded Middle, that is, the middle zone and makes the gospel more relevant among the Tharaka community. It also recognizes the Functionalist theory that posits that an institution is only relevant so long as it is fulfilling the needs of the people in the community.

REFERENCES

- Cole, V. (1998). *Africanizing the faith: another look at Contextualization of Theology*. In Ngewa, S. Shaw, M. and Tienou, T. (Eds), *Issues in African Christian Theology*. Nairobi. East African Education Publishers. (Pp. 12-23).
- Downs, G.P. (1994). *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*. Michigan. Zondervan Publishing House.
- Fadiman, A. J. (2012). *Meru's Golden Age. An Oral History of the Ameru*. Nairobi. Kiraitu Murungi Foundation.
- Hiebert, P. (1982). *The Flaw of the Excluded Middle*. Retrieved December 10, 2017.
- Kabuitu, P. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 27th August, at Nkondi*.
- Kamwara, O. (2012). *Fy2011/2012 Report*. Unpublished
- Kamwara, P. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 12th November, 2017 at Kajiampau*.
- Karani, S. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 20th August, 2017 at Nkarini*.
- Karuri, J. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 23rd August, 2017 at Kamujwa*.
- Kathanya, A. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 27th August 2017 at Nkondi*.
- Langmead, R. (1998). *Mission and Contextualisation*. In *A Journal of Tribal Studies*, Vol. ii, No. 1, January to June (PP. 45 – 61).
- Mugambi, J.N.K. (1989). *African Christian Theology: An Introduction*. Nairobi. EAEP.
- Mutembei, P. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 20th August, 2017 at Nkarini*.
- Muthini, S. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 20th August, 2017 at Nkarini*.
- Muthomi, j. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 18th November, 2017 at Rũngũ*.

- Mutugi, P. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 17th August, 2017 at Gatunga.*
- Mwangi, J. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 20th August, 2017 at Nkarini.*
- Njagi, B. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 20th August 2017, at September at Tunyai.*
- Njagi Z (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 24th August at Tunyai*
- Njoroge, H. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 30th September 2017, at Marimanti.*
- Nkonge, D.K. (2016). A Short History of the Anglican Church in Meru, Kenya (1969 – 2009). *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* ISSN (paper) 2224-5766 ISSN (online) 2225-0484 (online) Vol 6, No,2.
- Nthamburi, Z. (2000). *The Pilgrimage of the African Church: Towards the Twenty First Century.* Nairobi. Uzima Publishers.
- Nyaga, J. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 27th August 2017 at Nkondi.*
- Niver, R. (1970). *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* London. Longman.
- Rimita, D. M. (1988). *The NjuriNcheke of Meru.* Diocese of Meru. Kolbe Press.
- Rodney, S. (1996). *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History.* New Jersey. Princeton University Press.
- Rwanda, P. (2017). *Interviewed by the author on 29th October, 2017 at Tunyai.*
- Salala, C. (1998). The World of the Spirits: Basukuma Traditional Religion and Biblical Christianity. In Ngewa, S. Shaw, M. and Tienou, T. (Eds), *Issues in African Christian Theology.* Nairobi. East African Education Publishers. (Pp. 133-139).
- Semenye, L. (2006). Christian Education in Africa. In Adeyemo, T.(Ed), *African Bible Commentary.* (pp.1480), Nairobi WorldAlive Publishers Ltd.
- Shaw, D. R. (1995). *Contextualizing the Power and the Glory.* In International Journal of Frontier Missions, Vol 12:3 Jul – Sep.
- The Tharaka of Kenya. (1994). *People and Language Detail Report.* Tharaka of Kenya <http://psalm/joshuaproject.net/text/7t15463-ke>. Retrieved May 20. 2017.