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REVISITING OUR INDIGENOUS SHRINES THROUGH *MUNGIKI*

GRACE NYATUGAH WAMUE

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the *Mungiki* movement's beliefs and practices as they relate to the traditional religion and cultural practice of the Gikuyu people. *Mungiki* is a Gikuyu word taken from the etymological root word, *Muingi*, to mean masses or people. The *Mungiki* is a fundamentalist movement with a religious, political and cultural agenda. It argues that, since African religion is discerned in terms of beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and religious officials, a conversion to other faiths is not practical. Its followers are therefore calling for re-conversion from foreign worship to indigenous beliefs. Although the *Mungiki* is largely a Gikuyu affair, the sect expects to embrace all other Kenyans. It calls for the teaching of African indigenous values before any change can take place. In practice, *Mungiki* followers have denounced the Christian faith. The movement has adopted Gikuyu religion as a weapon to challenge political and religious authority, and has raised an outcry from religious leaders and government officials. *Mungiki* followers affirm that theirs is a religious and not a political movement.

HISTORY HAS SHOWN THAT RELIGION CAN BE, and has been, used as a tool to oppress, exploit and alienate or discriminate. It has also been used to liberate and restore people's life and dignity. Either way, it offers to those who view it as the basis for struggle a realization of their full humanity, faith, hope, and courage to continue struggling, in spite of all obstacles and costs. Religion can therefore act as a depressant, which tranquillizes people's aspirations; Karl Marx referred to it as 'the opium of the masses' or 'opiate for the poor'. At times, religion has been used as a silencing tool.

Religion also acts as a stimulant, which activates people to rise against any form of oppression and start fighting for their liberation. In this form religion becomes a solid ground of conflict. Based on this background, we shall examine a new movement referred to as the *Mungiki*,¹ which has

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1. Information on the *Mungiki* is derived mainly from participant observation in religious gatherings and oral interviews with the followers, supplemented by reports from the Kenya press. This article was originally presented at the first African Association for the Study of Religion (AASR) conference in Africa on 'The Religions of East Africa and their Study in the Age of Globalization', held in Nairobi, Kenya, 27–31 July 1999. An amended version will also be published in the volume of revised papers of the conference, to be published by Acton Press, Nairobi. The conference was sponsored by the International Association for the History of Religion, the Prince Claus Fund, the AASR, the Dutch Association for the Study of Religions, and Kenyatta University.

started in Kenya in the recent past. This has become a religious movement clothed with diverse aspirations ranging from political to religio-cultural and socio-economic liberation. One of the dramatic aspects of the *Mungiki* is its prophetic and vocal fight for the political liberation of Kenyans through a return to indigenous shrines. This article observes some of the movement's beliefs and practices as related to the traditional religion and cultural practice of the Gikuyu people.

Origin of the Mungiki

Mungiki is a Gikuyu word that has been taken from the etymological root word *Muingi*, meaning masses or people. It is a term derived from the word *nguki*, which means *irindi* (crowds) and reflects a belief that people are entitled to a particular place of their own in the ontological order. The term therefore means 'fishing the crowd from all corners of Kenya'. *Mungiki* also refers to a religio-political movement composed mainly of large masses of Gikuyu origin, and other non-Gikuyu (Pokots, Luos and Maasais). These are mainly youths in the 18–40 age group. However, there are exceptional cases in the 40–60 age bracket. The movement is estimated by its national co-ordinator to have about one and a half million members, including 400,000 women. These numbers are questionable, however, since it appears that most Kenyans shun the sect.

Most of the members are the victims of land clashes in the regions that were affected by ethnic conflicts on the eve of the 1992 multiparty general elections in Kenya, the majority of whom are either standard-eight or form-four school dropouts composed mainly of low-income earners in the *jua kali* (appropriate technology or 'hot sun') sector. However, current research indicates that there are also followers from public universities, in particular Nairobi, Kenyatta and Egerton. The group strongly resents exploitation and the accumulation of massive wealth by a small proportion of Kenyans, especially in the top political ranks. They argue that this is at the expense of the masses, who are left landless and jobless. In this sense, *Mungiki* followers try to demonstrate their goodwill in the face of resentment against unfair and unjust practices in society by sharing resources among themselves.

The group comprises the less advantaged in society. As such, they equate the term *Mungiki* with oppression, exploitation, and alienation of the masses. Initially the aim of the *Mungiki* was to sensitize people against the government which they accused of starting and fuelling the 1992 clashes. Although they do not openly admit it, the sect is said to have started administering oaths to its members in the hope that they would become united politically to retaliate against the violence. The movement immediately alarmed the government to the extent that, ever since, the police have been dispersing any public or private *Mungiki* assemblies and arresting the followers.

Mungiki followers were initially part of the Tent of the Living God — a registered sect founded by 58-year-old Ngonya wa Gakonya in 1987, with a large group of followers in Central, Nairobi and Rift Valley Provinces. Ngonya began the Tent movement as long ago as 1960 when he started questioning the Christian faith as professed by his parents.² He immediately engaged in a search for truth in the African religious heritage by consulting the old people. Having undergone a formal education, he started sensitizing people about African religious beliefs, and joined the Akorino sect in 1988, from which he later split, after defying the elders' warnings against publicizing his views. He engaged in rigorous public campaigns, which were banned in 1990 after a mass rally held at the Kamukunji grounds in Nairobi. Ngonya was arrested and imprisoned for two years. His release, through a presidential amnesty, coincided with the clamour for political pluralism in Kenya. Leaders of the Tent decided to form a political party with the aim of gaining parliamentary representation, which, they argued, would play a role as the forerunner to a religious culmination. The Democratic Movement (DEMO), a political party, was born, with Ngonya as its interim leader. It was denied registration because of its religious background, or, as its leaders argue, it was blocked by the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU) from participation in the 1992 parliamentary elections, for fear it might win. After the refusal of registration, Ngonya collaborated with KANU, a move that caused him to be denounced by some of the followers, who accused him of lacking principles.

Mungiki was a splinter movement starting as a more vibrant group than the Tent of the Living God. For a long time, the sect remained secret due to the single-party political system which detained those appearing to oppose the ruling ideology. However, the group benefited from freedom of worship, expression and association with the advent of multiparty politics in 1992. Like the Tent, *Mungiki* members are distributed around Nairobi, particularly within the slums of Dandora, Korogocho, Githurai, Kariobangi, Kawangware, Kibera, Mathare and Kangemi. They are also scattered in Central and Rift Valley Provinces. Of particular interest within the latter province are places like Molo, Olenguruoni, Subukia, Elbourgon, Nakuru, Nyahururu and Laikipia, all of which have been centres of bloodshed during the ethnic clashes. The group has also started acquiring followers in other parts of Kenya, notably, in the areas of ex-Mau Mau concentration.

Waruinge Ndura (now referred to as Ibrahim after his conversion to Islam) is a 1992 secondary school leaver from Nakuru District.³ He is a grandson of the ex-Mau Mau fighter General Waruinge. He claims to have co-founded the *Mungiki* sect with six other young people in 1987 when he

2. Author's interview, 1999.

3. Author's interview, 1999.

was only 15 years old and in form one at Molo Secondary School. According to him, the group consulted ex-Mau Mau generals in Laikipia and Nyandarwa districts who approved of their plans. Notably, over 60 percent of the sect's members are below 30 years of age. Nevertheless, they claim to be authorities on some of the ancient religious and cultural practices of the Gikuyu community. The elders consulted were ex-Mau Mau freedom fighters, notably from the group that vehemently rejected Christianity. These elders try to pass on Gikuyu traditions orally to the young *Mungiki* followers. Although their memory may be shaped and influenced by scripture, these elders are thoroughly conversant with Gikuyu indigenous beliefs and practices. The educated *Mungiki* members consult books on Gikuyu history as well as other writings by heroes like Marcus Garvey and Martin Luther. They also consult the Bible for what they refer to as relevant texts, specifically in the Old Testament. Even in casual conversation, *Mungiki* members spice their oratory with terminology that has long vanished from standard Gikuyu language. They use words such as *njama* (council), *kirira* (discourse), *igongona* (ceremony), *ucamba* (valour), and *thaai* (praise), with remarkable ease.

Essence of African religious beliefs

In order to understand the *Mungiki*, and the essence of their religious beliefs and cultural practices, it is important to make a quick survey of African indigenous practices which they vehemently advocate. In the opening remarks to his book, J. S. Mbiti observes that African religion permeates all departments of life so completely that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it.⁴ African religion is a reality; being the strongest element in the traditional background, it exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and way of life of the people concerned. Religion is discerned in terms of beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and religious officials.

African religion is expressed in proverbs. These are the philosophical systems of different African peoples, which have been formulated, and may be found in the rituals, oral traditions, ethics, and morals of the society concerned. They make up African philosophy, which here refers to the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act or speak in different life situations.

4. J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, London, 1969), p. 1. Mbiti is a popular author on the African religious heritage. He is also rather controversial among some theologians owing to the degree that his Christian background has influenced his writings. He seems to have seen African Traditional Religion through Christian eyes. A recovery of African Traditional Religion is, however, possible through informed oral traditions. Nevertheless, Mbiti's writings are important, albeit with critical analysis, for an understanding of African religious beliefs.

Traditional religions are not primarily for the individual, but for the community to which individuals belong. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person as such cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from their roots, their foundation, their context of security, their kinship and the entire group of those who make them aware of their own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements of life is to be outside the whole picture. Mbiti further observes that, for an African, to be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion.

Alienation of Africans from their religious ways of life leaves them in a vacuum devoid of a solid religious foundation. They are torn between the life of their forefathers, which, whatever else might be said about it, 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.

In these circumstances, functional Christianity and Islam do not seem to remove the sense of frustration. It is not enough to embrace a faith which is active once a week, on either Sunday or Friday, while the rest of the week is virtually empty. Equally, it is not enough to embrace a faith which is confined to a church building or a mosque, which is locked six days and opened only once or twice a week. Unless Christianity and Islam fully occupy the whole person as much as, if not more than, traditional religions do, most converts to these faiths will continue to revert to their old beliefs and practices for perhaps six days a week, and certainly at times of emergency and crisis. The whole environment and the whole time must be occupied by religious meaning, so that, at any moment and in any place, a person feels secure enough to act in a meaningful and religious consciousness. Since traditional religion occupies the whole person and the whole of his life, conversion to new religions like Christianity and Islam must embrace his language, thought patterns, fears, social relationships, attitudes and philosophical disposition, if that conversion is to make a lasting impact upon the individual and his community.⁵

In traditional religions there are no creeds to be recited; instead, the creeds are written in the heart of the individual, and each one is himself a living creed of his own religion. Where the individual is, there is his religion, for he is a religious being. That understanding makes Africans appear to be so religious: religion is in their whole system of being, a belief the *Mungiki* members seem to embrace. What they do is motivated by what they believe,

5. Although the *Mungiki* initially denied any conversion from one religion to another, they have since publicly acknowledged their conversion to Islam. The scope of this study does not cover that phase.

and what they believe springs from what they do and experience. Thus, belief and action in African traditional society cannot be separated. The two belong to a single whole. Similarly, the *Mungiki* argues that there is no conversion from one traditional religion to another. Each society in Africa has its own religious system, and the propagation of such a complete system would involve propagating the entire life of the people concerned. Therefore, a person has to be born in a particular society in order to assimilate the religious system of the society to which he belongs.

Mbiti concurs with this belief. He admits that conversion from one religion to another is not practical, since religion to the Africans is a way of life. Notably, both Mbiti and the *Mungiki* contradict this belief. It has already been mentioned above that, while the former has converted to Christianity, the latter have converted to Islam. Moreover, the *Mungiki* members are calling for the re-conversion of Africans from foreign worship to indigenous beliefs. This indicates that re-conversion is possible. Traditional religions and philosophy are concerned with people in past and present time. God comes into the picture as an explanation of people's contact with time. There is no messianic hope or apocalyptic vision, with God stepping in at some future moment to bring about a radical reversal of people's normal life. God is not pictured in an ethical/spiritual relationship with a person. People's acts of worship and turning to God are pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual or mystical.

Gikuyu people and religion

A brief look at the Gikuyu people may also shed light on an understanding of the *Mungiki* movement. As paraphrased by Wanjohi, the Gikuyu people are Bantu who live in Kenya, mainly in Central Province.⁶ This province comprises seven administrative districts: Kiambu, Thika, Murang'a, Nyeri, Kirinyaga, Maragwa, and Nyandarwa. According to Wanjohi, recent statistics are not available, but it is estimated that about five to six million people live in Central Province. Although one of the smallest in area, this province is one of the most densely populated in Kenya, with a high birth rate. However, not all the Gikuyu people live in Central Province. They inhabit other provinces as well, especially the Rift Valley Province where Gikuyu settlers now form a majority of the population of Nakuru and Laikipia Districts. Taking the Gikuyu of the diaspora into account, the total population could come to about six and a half million, making up the largest ethnic community in Kenya. Central Province, their home, is a high plateau whose altitude ranges from 1,000 to 2,500 metres

6. G. Wanjohi, *The Wisdom and Philosophy of Gikuyu Proverbs* (Paulines Publication Africa, Nairobi, 1997), p. 19.

above sea level. The plateau is in the form of an oblong roughly running in a north-east/south-west direction, and bounded by four mountains or hills, to the north-east Mount Kenya, to the west the Nyandaraua Range, to the south-east Kianjahi, and to the south-west Kiambiruiru. (Kianjahi and Kiambiruiru are also known as Kirima Mbogo and Ngong' Hills respectively.)

Kenyatta observes that the Gikuyu believe in one God, *Ngai*, the creator and giver of all things.⁷ *Ngai moombi wa indo ciothe na mohei kerende indo ciothe*. He has no father, mother, or companion of any kind. His work is done in solitude. *Ngai ndari ithe kana nyina, ndari githia kana githethwa*. He loves or hates people according to their behaviour. The creator lives in the sky. *Ngai eikaraga matuine*, but he has temporary homes on earth, situated on mountains, where he may rest during his visits. The visits are made with a view to his carrying out a kind of general inspection, *koroora thi*, and to bring blessings and punishments to the people, *korehera andu kiguni kana gitei*. The common name used by the Gikuyu in addressing the Supreme Being in prayers and sacrifices is *Ngai, mwene nyaga* ('possessor of brightness'). The mountain of brightness is believed by the Gikuyu to be *Ngai's* official resting-place, and in their prayers they turn towards Kere-Nyaga (Mt Kenya) and, with their hands raised towards it, they offer their sacrifices, taking the mountain to be the holy earthly dwelling-place of *Ngai*. *Ngai* has no messengers whom he may, like an earthly chief, send on ahead to warn people of his coming and to prepare and clear the way. His approach is foretold only by the sounds of his own preparations. Thunder is the cracking of his joints, like a warrior limbering up for action. It is also the noise of his approach in general, as if drums were being beaten and horns blown to warn the people of the presence of the heavenly chief.

Mungiki's aims and objectives

With this background we can now look at the main objective of the *Mungiki*, which is to unite and mobilize the Kenyan masses to fight against the yoke of mental slavery. Although the *Mungiki* is almost exclusively a Gikuyu affair, the group expects to embrace all other Kenyans. This would be achieved through similar but autonomous movements that would revive the heritage of other African peoples, who have their own specific beliefs and practices. Kirinyaga Kingdom is seen by the *Mungiki* as the first of the community-based kingdoms that will be established in their country. Waruinge says with the certitude of a seer: 'It is a bit like the Baganda, Acholi, and other traditional Kingdoms of Uganda'.⁸ Soon, he says,

7. Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (Secker and Warburg, London, 1938), p. 233.

8. Author's interview, 1999.

Kenyans will witness the inauguration of, among others, the Mijikenda (Coast), Abagusii (Nyanza), Akamba (Eastern), and Abaluhya (Western) kingdoms. (The names in brackets refer to provinces.) Like the Kirinyaga Kingdom, Murungu, the traditional God of the Gikuyu, will govern these tribal kingdoms, which will rely on God for guidance and sustenance. Each kingdom will select a council of elders who will in turn appoint representatives to sit in a national house of representatives. The elders will use a national cultural code that will unite all Kenyans, while fighting undesirable cultural practices.

These kingdoms are religious, not political. They may be compared with a Catholic diocese. Much as the *Mungiki* followers denounce political involvement within the proposed kingdoms, it is unclear how their mission would be established outside politics. However, the first aim is to unite the Gikuyu people and thereafter other ethnic groups. *Mungiki* has four aims: to unite the Gikuyu people, and consequently, other Kenyans; to redeem the Gikuyu from Western culture brought about by Christianity and colonialism; to liberate the Kenyan masses from political oppression and economic exploitation; and to restore Africans to their indigenous values.

Foreign culture and religion brought by Christianity and colonization have led Kenyans to continue suffering religious and political oppression as well as economic exploitation, in their view. Accordingly, the liberation of the masses from mental captivity must come through a return to indigenous ways of life, in particular culture and religion. All ethnic groups in Kenya should, therefore, denounce foreign faiths, especially Christianity, and revert to traditional beliefs and practices.

The denunciation of foreign worship, in particular Christianity, and a reversion to indigenous shrines is a doctrine that has caused much controversy, misunderstanding and condemnation of the *Mungiki* on the part of almost all Kenyans. The church and the state, in particular, are quite vocal in condemning this belief. In this connection, Bishop Timothy Kiama, chairman of Nyahururu Pastors' Fellowship, called on the church to reject the activities of the *Mungiki* sect, which he said were morally impaired.⁹ He alleged that the sect had a distorted and animist doctrine which lacked religious sanctity and was morally depraved; its action amounted to a clear onslaught against the established churches. The sect, he argued, propagates a subversive doctrine and agenda, which the Church should reject and combat decisively, in particular *Mungiki* demonstrations. Further, the *Mungiki* is a fundamentalist movement with a religious, political and cultural agenda: its slogans point to a serious heretical dimension from the Christian churches' point of view; and the philosophy of isolation is a dangerous move to alienate the Gikuyu community and set it on a collision

9. *Kenya Times*, 5 January 1999.

course with the government. The government has also spearheaded the latter allegation.

Mungiki advocates a ‘complete’ return to indigenous beliefs and practices, a move, it is believed, that will unite Kenyans to fight against political and mental oppression. A return to indigenous shrines is seen as the only way to achieve this goal.¹⁰ The return is referred to as *kigongona* (‘spiritualness’) which, according to *Mungiki*, has been lost since Christianity was introduced to Africa. Since then, the Gikuyu people, like all other Kenyans, have lost their spiritualness. Consequently, Gikuyuland and the entire country have been defiled by foreign worship, which, in turn, has brought numerous socio-economic and political problems to Kenya. Christianity has been accused of creating drastic divisions among the Gikuyu, which has consequently annoyed *Ngai*. Gikuyu people, like other Kenyans, must therefore have one religion, that is, worship God like their fathers did before the intervention of the missionaries. As Mbiti agrees, Africans’ departure from their religion causes an ontological disorder; it affects both the individual and the community.

Mungiki calls for the teaching of African indigenous values before any change can take place. This is referred to as *Kirira*. It is a stage of sensitization about the consequences of abandoning African culture and religion, which, according to the group, has been the cause of the current woes in Kenya. Each ethnic community should be taught its religious values and how these can mobilize people in times of need. A case in point is the role of the Gikuyu religion during the Mau Mau struggle, in which African beliefs and practices were used by the Gikuyu to fight colonialism.

Kirira should lead to a socio-religious cleansing ritual known as *guthera*. This consists of traditional rites of denouncing foreign cultures and faiths. Critics of the *Mungiki* have equated this ceremony with the infamous female circumcision rite, referred to by feminists as female genital mutilation. However, *Mungiki* followers insist that their sect does not advocate the physical act of circumcision *per se*,¹¹ but the moral grounding that is associated with the traditional rite. They assert that less than 10 percent of *Mungiki* women are circumcised and that no one is insisting that they undergo circumcision. Theirs is a cry for more genuine and practical

10. A shrine, in physical terms, refers to the holy ground where the Gikuyu people used to worship. This could either be under a certain tree that is considered holy (e.g. *Mugumo*) or a mountain grove or rock. In *Mungiki*’s beliefs, all Africans must work together to rebuild the destroyed shrines (i.e. spirituality), which have been destroyed by the foreigners. The *Mungiki* perceive themselves as spearheading this mission. Indeed, there is a connection with Kenyatta’s dedication and call for re-building the shrine at Mukurwe-wa-Nyagathanga; see Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*.

11. On several occasions, certain *Mungiki* have been accused of forcing clitoridectomy on unsuspecting Kenyans, a move that has equally met with condemnation especially by gender activists and the Church. Though it is still widely practised in some parts of Kenya, the government outlaws the rite.

religion. According to them, Christianity has never been relevant to Africa, since it has always been used as a means of oppression. In practice, *Mungiki* followers have denounced the Christian faith with all its teachings, rituals, names, beliefs, practices and churches.

In their open criticism of the current political system in Kenya, the followers observe that most political leaders are Christians who attend church every Sunday. Nevertheless, they continue to oppress the people by amassing wealth through seasoned corruption, grabbing public land, bribery, and economic exploitation of the masses. Christianity, through the Bible (*Gikunjo*: tying, imprisoning, binding, enslaving, conditioning), has resulted in mental slavery from which the Gikuyu and all other Kenyans must rid themselves. As the *Mungiki* observes, the Bible has been used to confuse and confine Africans to mental colonization. As a result, most Kenyans fail to see the hypocrisy demonstrated by the so-called Christians. By failing to criticize the Christians, the masses continue to support the corrupt government. According to the *Mungiki* argument, God does not support corruption. Consequently, the corrupt Christians do not worship God.

Similarly, God never wanted the Africans to abandon Him. As such, He gave each ethnic group ample land with plenty to eat. In this way, God guaranteed the Africans direct support. As a result of Christian interference, however, Africans abandoned their God, a move with dire consequences, the severest being division and disunity. In this connection, the *Mungiki* strongly accuse and condemn Christianity for dividing families, so that, in one home, several Christian denominations or sects are represented. It is common practice in Kenya to find the father in the Catholic faith, the mother a Protestant, and the children in the various versions of the charismatic movements. This, according to the *Mungiki*, has been one of the problems brought by Christianity. Consequently, disunity in beliefs and practices has caused the African peoples numerous problems.

Ironically, the *Mungiki* associate every problem currently afflicting Kenya with these divisions and the abandonment of *Ngai*. In that case, solutions can be found only through a return to indigenous ways of worship. They blame the Europeans who strategically plan and create economic hardships in order to exploit the Africans for ever. Neo-colonialism, created by the current African leaders and supported by the European powers, has heightened the existing economic hardships. Consequently, since Western religion has been used to oppress Africans, the latter in turn have to use their religion to mobilize themselves and fight for their rights and identity.

The fraternity is vehement in its denial of the accusation that they are taking Africans back to savagery and barbarism. They readily defend their faith as ideal for development, by insisting that neither Europeans nor Japanese nor Chinese abandoned their religion or culture in order to develop, yet these countries are economically stable. Equally, Africans

should have been allowed to keep their culture and still acquire technology. The *Mungiki* see the accusations as part of a smear campaign simply because they openly point to the weaknesses of both government and Christians. They also assert that drawing inspiration from African religion to struggle for mental decolonization does not imply backwardness.

The significance of the symbols they use shows a clear political intervention of their faith. These are the colours red, black, green, black, and white, in that order from top to bottom; red symbolizes blood, black the African peoples, green stands for land, while white is a symbol of peace. According to the *Mungiki*, Christianity has disunited black people in their own land: hence, green separates the two black colours. Consequently, there is a lot of bloodshed in Kenya through ethnic conflicts, accidents and crime, a reason why red appears at the top of their flag. This disunity has been associated with the impact of Christian hypocrisy and capitalism. To achieve unity, the *Mungiki* advocate a return to traditional forms of worship as the only way to rid Africans of mental slavery. That way, peace will be attained.

The young *Mungiki* members refer to themselves as warriors of the land. They propose an indigenous religio-political revolution referred to as *itwika*, a traditional Gikuyu ceremony performed to hand over tribal responsibility from one generation to another. In the Gikuyu religio-cultural and political system, each generation (*riika*) was vested with the responsibility for tribal government, including the conducting of religious ceremonies and the control of law and justice. After 30–35 years' service, all members of that generation should retire from public life; notably, that would be at around 60–65 years of age, since they acquired public office at around the age of 35. Each generation had two names, Maina and Mwangi, that of its grandfather's generation and its own. These were part of a cycle of names repeated every nine generations.¹² As soon as a generation had taken over control of tribal affairs, its members ceased to use their inherited name and were known only by their specific name.

Leakey has given an analysis of the actual *itwika* ceremony. Briefly, this was composed of representatives from the incoming and outgoing generations, who would meet several times in selected places to discuss the transfer procedure. Among the issues discussed were the fees in terms of sheep, goats and rams, the younger people would pay to the elders, which served as retirement benefits and pension. In addition, education in tribal affairs formed part of the hand-over rituals. When the *itwika* was over (a process that took several years), the new generation took office and all members of the senior generation retired from public life. They no longer conducted the religious life of the people, nor were they responsible for initiation ceremonies or the control of the judicial courts.

12. S. B. Leakey, *The Southern Gikuyu before 1903* (Academic Press, London, 1977), vol. III, pp. 1278–83.

The Gikuyu political system is here compared with the Kenyan government. According to the *Mungiki*, the older generation has failed the people since the leaders continue to control the government, the judiciary and the executive, long after their term of office is over. Moreover, the older generation does not appear to be preparing the young people for a takeover since they have no representatives in the government. Equally, the *Mungiki* youth feel betrayed by the leaders. A case in point is the fact that they are jobless and therefore do not have a say in the socio-economic and political affairs of the country. To the *Mungiki* followers, the handing-over ceremony is long overdue. It must take place, whether the leaders want it or not. It is important to note that the sect has vowed to use physical force to change the political system, since the government does not seem to recognize that the *itwika* ceremony should take place.¹³ Such a claim has contributed to the government's fear of the sect's militarism.

The *Mungiki* aims to challenge the divine mandate of the Christian faith and teachings. This is elaborated in its numerous campaigns called *ciungano* (plural, *kiungano*), in which its followers challenge Christianity theologically by arguing that exploiters and oppressors cannot preach the good news of liberation. Christianity is therefore blasphemous since its adherents do not practise what they preach.

Confrontations with the law

The sect has raised an outcry from religious leaders and government officials. On several occasions the local press has reported scenes in which the *Mungiki* has clashed with the authorities. Church leaders and government officials have continuously and vehemently been at the forefront in condemning the *Mungiki* movement. In particular, President Moi has repeatedly accused the sect of taking binding oaths in order to overthrow his government. *Mungiki* leaders are adamant in their denial of the accusation of oath-taking, which they regard as part of a smear campaign by the government. They assert that the fact that they draw their inspiration from the struggle for independence should not be construed as meaning that they are taking oaths. On a number of occasions, followers have appeared in court accused of oath-taking and conducting undefined illegal activities, only to be discharged for lack of evidence.

So anxious is the KANU government about the sect that, more than once, the Member of Parliament for Molo,¹⁴ Kihika Kimani, has paraded a group

13. *Sunday Nation*, 30 January 2000.

14. Molo is a political division situated in the Rift Valley Province. It is well known for the infamous ethnic clashes that shook Kenya in the early 1990s.

of dreadlocked youths at presidential rallies in Nakuru town, introducing them as repentant *Mungiki* followers. However, the sect's national leadership swiftly denounces the so-called defectors as impostors being used to gain political advantage. According to the sect's followers, no *bona fide* member can defect because conversion to *Mungiki* is irreversible.

The sect has, however, clearly acquired impetus from several political events. A case in point occurred on 12 December 1998. Waruinge organized his own congress at Mukurwe-wa-Gathanga shrine situated in the heart of Gikuyuland, with the aim of inaugurating what he refers to as the Kirinyaga Kingdom. Notably, this was the day the government was celebrating its thirty-fifth *Jamhuri* (Independence) Day. This was an important site because the shrine at Mukurwe-wa-Gathanga was initially a cultural place due to its significance as the place of mythical origin of the Gikuyu people, where God placed the first man, Gikuyu, and is dedicated to *Ngai* (God). It is situated on government land and is therefore controlled by the state. Chanting Mau Mau war songs and reciting traditional prayers, the sect hoisted their flag with the stern warning that they would not tolerate further disruption of their religious activities by the government.

On 19 November 1998, the shrine, on a four and a half acre plot at Gatari Market, 17 kilometres from Murang'a town, had been gazetted as a National Monument by the Minister of Home Affairs and National Heritage. The Murang'a County Council, under whose jurisdiction the shrine falls, immediately declared it out of bounds for the *Mungiki*. The *Mungiki* insist that they have a constitutional right to hold prayers at the Heritage site at any time, even during other public celebrations. They base this claim on the Constitution which allows freedom of worship, and which does not stipulate time and venue. *Mungiki* followers affirm that theirs is a religious and not a political movement. On the other hand, the *Mungiki* claim that they attend shrine prayers on the orders of the *arathi* ('seers'). They have painted *Mungiki* structures in the shrine with their colours. The only non-Gikuyu epithet reads *Muungano wa Ukombozi*, the Kiswahili words for 'liberation movement'. The rest tell the history of the Gikuyu community, with a strong emphasis on the Mau Mau freedom struggle.

A discussion with any *Mungiki* member barely carries on for five minutes without spontaneously deviating into the politics of contemporary Kenya. The members bitterly lament KANU's machinations that split the original Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) party when it was all set to remove KANU from power. They also criticize the widespread political oppression, poverty and violence experienced by Kenyans at the hands of government agents in the same breath as they condemn cultural and religious imperialism.

Conclusion

The religio-political movement has adopted Gikuyu religion as a weapon to challenge political and religious authority. In this, religion becomes a tool to mobilize the masses for active resistance and to claim liberation and justice, as is demonstrated by the *Mungiki's* condemnation of ethnicity, tribalism, nepotism, oppression, bribery, corruption, idleness, immorality, drug abuse, crime, and so on. However, much as these people appear to condemn ethnicity and tribalism, by establishing a sect that is purely Gikuyu in terms of culture, beliefs, and practices, they are promoting the same vices they oppose. Although the sect condemns fighting and bloodshed, the alternative that they offer in order to unite Kenyans and attain peace seems military, ethnic and 'tribalist'. This is demonstrated by the use of liberation songs in their worship and vehement calls for political unrest if the government does not change its stand on certain issues. The sect also appears to be confused about problems afflicting Kenya in addition to colonialism and neo-colonialism. Indeed there are numerous problems affecting the country, but these cannot be blamed entirely on foreign worship, specifically Christianity. The bad governance experienced in many African countries is not a result of Christian shortcomings. *Mungiki's* call for a return to indigenous shrines may not be practical in various ways, for example, a return to issues like female genital mutilation, sacrifices, oaths, and such outdated customs.

On the other hand, *Mungiki* followers are, for the most part, hard-working, peace-loving Kenyans with strong virtues of generosity, honesty, unity and morality. The management of their activities is proof of this. Their leader claims that every month they raise 4.5 million Kenyan shillings at the rate of 3 shillings per member, to finance their mission activities. The present author has visited various *Mungiki* farms, where the spirit of harmony, hard work and unity is evident. In Nga'rua (Rift Valley Province) farm, for example, the group has turned more than 20 acres of land into maize and livestock farming. The followers also demonstrated their generosity by giving the author an elaborate lunch, contrary to the outside picture of the *Mungiki* as hostile, unreasonable people. By such gestures of interaction, the followers present their humanity and humility and their aspiration to be understood in their struggle to be like any other hard-working Kenyans. They have quite positive and practical options to offer to Kenyan society. Unfortunately, owing to their vocal and open criticism of strong forces in Kenya that seem to support the political system, their agenda, albeit positive, has been overlooked.

Consequently, they have been denied freedom of worship and assembly, a move that is contrary to human rights standards. The denial of assembly has made the sect more bitter and indeed stronger, thus accelerating their

spread and strengthening their activities. History should show the government that prohibiting the *Mungiki* from free assembly will not change their ambition and determination. If anything, the government's stand has only made the grass appear greener on the other side. Nevertheless, the government's quest for maintaining law and order overrides any positive objective the *Mungiki* may have, thus dismissing them completely. It is important to allow such a group a hearing as long as militant activities are controlled. Indeed, there should be a way of doing this.

People interpret religion in the way that suits them. In some cases, religion becomes a catalyst for continuing the struggle for human and civil rights. At such times, it acts as a strong bond of unity. People turn to passive resistance, which may eventually become violent, leading to rebellion and bloodshed. From that point of view, the *Mungiki* ought to be condemned. In contrast, repressing the movement only makes its followers more determined and violent. Recent activities by the sect have confirmed this.