
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Worship in the Ameru culture

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ABSTRACT

Debates around African traditional religion (ATR) systems have unravelled controversial viewpoints in academia. However, there is consensus amongst scholars on the major features of ATR cosmology designed for the multicultural African context. It is against this background that this paper adopts the defined ATR lens in its exploration of worship in the Ameru culture in Kenya, with specific reference to its mutually intelligible dialects notably Mwimbi, Imenti, Muthambi, Chuka, Tigania, Igembe, Tharaka and Igoji. The areas of study were in Tharaka Nithi and Meru counties in Kenya. Data collection entailed interviews and focused group discussions with a total of 40 resource persons on the Ameru culture aged between 45 and 102 years from the aforementioned counties. Research findings reveal that the Ameru cosmology mirrors ATR belief systems which resonates with beliefs in a supreme god or gods, ancestral spirits, witchcraft, and medicine men.

KEYWORDS

African Traditional Religion, ancestral spirits, gods, medicine men and witchcraft

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Cosmology of the African Traditional Religion

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of belief and practices. Religion permeates into all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it...African peoples are aware of these elements religion: God, spirits and divinities as part of the traditional body of beliefs. (Mbiti 1991)

Introduction

African tradition religion (ATR) is as old as mankind. This fact is buttressed by archeological literature which strongly supports Africa as the cradle of mankind thesis. Unlike Judeo-Christian and Islam which have reference books such as the Bible and Quran respectively, African Traditional Religion lacks a tangible reference book but relies on cross-generational oral transmission of cultural values that essentially define the moral fabric of any African society. Apparently, ATR has no known founder therefore, reference will always be made to the way of life of ancestors and how they performed rituals in their societies (cf. Beyers, 2009, Murove, 2018, Ndemanu, 2018, Oppong 2022), and as Mbiti (1991: 13-14) puts it

African traditional religion is the product of thinking and experiences of our forefathers and mothers that is men, women and children of former generations. They formed ideas, they formulated religious beliefs, they observed religious ceremonies and rituals, they told proverbs and myths which they safeguarded the life of the individual

From the foregoing, Onuzulike (2008) and Ndemanu (2018) affirm that ATR is interlaced with culture hence is the moral lens by which African societies view life. It is a truism that multilingual Africa is a bedrock of cultural diversity which radiates many worship systems across the expansive continent. Despite the numerous forms of worship, a number of commonalities characterize ATR as outlined in the works of Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada (2022) below:

i) Invisible and visible Worlds

According to Beyers (2009) African cosmology dissects the world into invisible and visible realms. The invisible world is the humble abode of God, gods/deities and ancestors, whereas the visible world is the land of the living. The two worlds have permeable walls in the sense that ancestors and spirits can cross over from the invisible world to the visible world to either inflict harm on wrong doers or bring good fortune to the righteous. For harmony to exist in both worlds, a cosmic balance is imperative.

ii) Concept of God, ancestors, deities and medicine men

According to Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada (2022), Beyers (2009) and Ndemanu (2018) ATR construes God as an omnipresent and omnibenevolent supernatural being. According to Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada (2022) God is accorded titles for example, the Akan refers to him as *Onyakopōn* (the Supreme being) and *Ōdomankoma* (the eternal one). Among the Igbo, he is referred to as *Chineke* (the creator) or *Chukwu* (the Great Spirit). However, in some cultures, God remains nameless since assigning him names is construed as limiting his supremacy. As a powerful being, his presence is manifested everywhere and his benevolence is witnessed in contexts where he stretches his hands to solve pressing needs. In terms of hierarchy, God occupies the topmost position by virtue of the fact he sustains life. He therefore works closely with gods/deities and ancestors.

Ancestors play a crucial role in African cosmology. As residents of the invisible world, they serve as life sustaining forces. Ancestors like God or gods are accorded titles in many African languages, such as *Wahenga* in Kiswahili or *Okwokwo* (great grandparents in Igbo spoken in Nigeria). Abiogun (2006) offers three classifications of ancestors notably those who are still retained in our memory, the departed living dead (up to five generations) and those who are hardly remembered by the living. For one to be an ancestor, the following requirements are necessary: one becomes an ancestor after death, one must have died in old age and honorably, like in the case of war. This means that children, a youthful person or someone who has committed suicide cannot be an ancestor. Finally, one must have been morally upright. Ancestors had designated roles as listed below:

- They are custodians of morality, customs, traditions and were bound by the earthly moral codes.
- Hierarchically, they fall below God and lesser deities. Beyers (2009) contends that there is a thin line between spirits and deities. Seemingly, spirits roam the visible world, whereas deities are much closer to god. Deities have divine characteristics and mostly reside far from earth though some reside on earth for example some minor gods can be children. Abiogun (2006) contends there are two forms of spirits those which emanate from unknown sources and those who once assumed a human form.
- They communicate with the living through dreams and visions and reveal themselves through interventions by oracles, diviners, and medicine men. The latter can appease them by offering sacrifices especially during calamities or misfortunes.
- They are guardians of the living and offer protection to the living. In turn, the living offer them food or perform libations to register their presence. Conversely, they can punish the living by causing misfortunes especially in contexts such as incest, murder, disobedience and other moral vices. As such, ancestors are venerated but not worshipped
- They maintain societal harmony through upholding social stability. They are therefore inferior to God but serve as mediators between the living and the supernatural world.
- Ancestors are advisors and the living rely on their advice. They are therefore revered and not joked around with.

Medicine men played an important role in African societies where holistic healing was prioritized. According to Mumo (2012) holistic healing is an African reality where prolonged illness is not only treated physically by Western medicine, but would demand a supernatural intervention in the invisible world because Africans conceptualize health as having physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions. Furthermore, in African societies, ill health comprised diseases, recurring misfortunes, sorcery and curses therefore the role played by medicine men could not be downplayed in the African society. Medicine men were believed to possess supernatural powers sufficient to handle both physical and psychological causes of illness. Medicine men are contrasted with witchdoctors since the latter use supernatural powers to inflict harm on the living while the former use their healing powers as antidotes. According to Mumo (2012) there were ways in which one could be a medicine man. First and foremost, one could be born having the gift and this would be in cases where midwives would find pebbles in the hands of a new born baby. Second, it was

hereditary and was culturally transmitted where a parent could teach his descendants the craft. According to Mumo (2012) Medicine men performed the following roles:

[-They provided antidotes for bewitched persons by prescribing preventive measures such as taking concoctions, using charms or wearing amulets.

-They were consulted in cases of prolonged illness so as to provide a remedy.

-They provided spiritual protection against evil spirits and performed exorcism.

-They performed sacrifices rituals to appease Gods and performed spiritual cleansing.

-They served as intermediaries between the invisible and visible worlds.

-They assumed the role of healers, a role they still maintain today since some Africans consult them secretly under the cover of darkness.

-They diagnosed causes of illnesses from a supernatural dimension and give their clients herbs to cure them from their ailments.

iii) Performance of rituals and sacrifices

Sacrifices and rituals were part and parcel of ATR and were communally performed in African societies (Beyers, 2009). Here, ancestors serve as intermediaries between God and the living. Moreover, they relay the prayers of the living to God. Sacrifices could be performed during good or bad occasions. A case in point is where Ndemanu (2018) gives an example of how his own graduation party was performed in Cameroun using Bangwa traditions. To begin with, the traditional rites began in his parental grandfather's compound where ancestral skulls were located. The skulls were arranged in a shrine in order of generations notably his grand parents, great grand parents the great greatgrand parents. The skulls were covered with a half broken clay pots. As dictated by the Bangwa culture, his father who happened to be the eldest member of the family assumed the role of the chief priest and flipped off the half broken clay pots to make the skulls visible. Prayers in praise of the ancestors were conducted where requests for family protection against misfortunes, while equally thanking them for granting Ndemanu (2018) the intelligence and peace of mind to complete his postgraduate studies were presented to the ancestors. After the prayers, the father performed sacrifices by taking a grilled goat meat and chopping it into pieces. The pieces were then mixed with palm oil and fried ground pumpkin seeds. The mixture together with drops of blood from the leg of a rooster were sprinkled on the skulls. Such rituals are not only among the Bangwa community, but are performed in other African cultures and not necessarily in the same way.

iv) Belief in witchcraft

Witchcraft is a cultural practice in all world cultures. Undeniably, Africans are generally superstitious and believe in witchcraft and malevolent spirits. In fact, Ndemanu (2018) estimates that more than 50% of Tanzanians, South Africans, Senegalese and Malians make sacrifices to ancestors to safeguard them against evil spirits. According to Beyers (2009), spirits can inhabit humans or inanimate objects. In Africa, natural death is acceptable, however, accidental death is questioned and people would want to unearth the root cause of someone's death. In the Luo culture, there is a popular adage that one does not just die and that someone must have had a hand in it. Accidental death would require the intervention of healers, diviners to establish the cause of death and if caused by a human agent, the person will be required to own up or take an oath which will forever bind him or her. According to Ndemanu (2018), the culprit would die while an innocent person would remain unaffected by the oath. In number of communities, oath taking was a dispute resolution mechanism. Ndemanu (2018) adds that in African societies, some people were gifted differently some were healers, diviners and witchdoctors and they had powers to detect the hand of malevolent spirits and repulse them so that they could not harm the living.

The Ameru

From the foregoing, having understood the cultural pillars of ATR, we now focus on the Ameru of Kenya to gauge how their culture of worship confirms to ATR. The following questions guided the study, what forms of worship existed in the Ameru culture? How was God perceived in the Ameru culture? What was the role of medicine men in the Ameru culture? Did the Ameru believe in witchcraft? Did the Ameru have curse reversal mechanisms? And finally were there similarities and differences in worship across the Ameru cultures? These are some of the questions that we seek to find answers so as to affirm or disapprove whether Ameru forms of worship are consistent with ATR.

Linguistically, the Ameru of Kenya are typologically classified as Bantu language. The Ameru occupy the eastern slopes of Mount Kenya. The region is divided into two counties notably Meru and Tharaka Nithi. The Ameru comprises eight distinct speech

communities but with a subsidiary group called the Muintini, although they do not form a distinct speech community. By county distribution on one hand, the Imenti, Tigania, Igembe and Igoji are predominantly found in Meru county. On the other hand, Tharaka, Mwimbi, Muthambi and Chuka are occupants of TharakaNithi county. The Imenti who live within the fringes of Meru town enjoy numerical majority in Meru county.

Methodology

To understand and appreciate the dynamics of the Ameru traditional worship systems, data was obtained from oral interviews and focused group discussions with resource persons identified by Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs from selected areas within Meru and Tharaka countries in Kenya. Ameru respondents were drawn from eight Ameru sub-tribes notably Igembe, Tigania, Chuka, Igoji, Imenti, Tharaka, Mwimbi and Muthambi who were drawn from divisions and locations outlined in Table 1.

Meru county		
Ameru dialect, number and age groups	Divisions	Locations
Igembe: 5 respondents (65-100 years)	Kiengulu, Itulu, Ndolesi, Kangeta	AthiruRuujine, Njua Cia Mwendwa, Njia
Imenti: 5 respondents (56-70 years)	Abothoguchi West	Katheri East
Tigania: 5 respondents (46-101 years)	Karama and Muthura divisions	Laibucha, Mukuani, Antuanduru, Karama and Ametho
Igoji: 5 respondents (45 to 82 years)	Igoji	Kuiri and Gentune
Tharaka Nithi county		
Ameru dialect, number and age	Division	Location
Mwimbi : 5 respondents (74 to 100 year)	Kiroo and Mwimbi	Maara
Muthambi : 5 respondents (59 to 90 years)	Muthambi	Muthambi
Tharaka: 5 respondents (60 to 84 years)	Tharaka central	Marimanti
Chuka: 5 respondents (71 to 102 years)	Chuka	Gitareni

.Data was analyzed qualitatively under the following themes for each subtribe: belief in gods, deities, witchcraft, ancestral spirits and role of medicine men and diviners.To guide the discussions on Ameru worship, focus will be on the Igembe, Imenti, Tigania, Igoji, Mwimbi, Muthambi, Tharaka and Chuka

Results and Discussion

Igembe

Worship

Humans living in African societies have been known to be deeply religious. The Ameru were not exempted from this religiosity. They worshiped a spiritual being called *Kini Kiro* (Mwegwe). They prayed on mountains where they believed their God resided. Women and men worshiped separately, besides, they also worshiped under trees and around waters or swamps. Apart from worshiping *Mwegwe*, the men also worshipped ancestral spirits for protection, blessings and forgiveness. They placed milk, blood, honey and crops on the graves of the dead to appease ancestral spirits. There were special shrines in the forests of Nyambene hills in Kenya that could only be accessed by a special few in the Igembe community.

Shrines could only be accessed by elders to offer prayers to both God and ancestors by offering sacrifices. Inexplicable occurrences within the community such as frequent or sudden deaths of people and animals, insanity, birth of physically and mentally challenged children, outbreak of floods and droughts were occasions that beckoned prayers and sacrifices by elders. A special bull, goat or sheep would be slaughtered and the blood would be used in the sacrifice. Special brew made from honey would be sprinkled as libation to the ancestors.

The Igembe believed in curses and witchcraft. A father's curse was considered the worst of all the curses. Before cleansing a person cursed by the father, he/she would first of all be subjected to thorough beating as a ritual of exorcising the curse. Atonement or reversing a father's curse was done by offering a he-goat to the father. The blood of the sacrificed animal would be poured onto the fire to extinguish it to symbolize the removal of the curse.

Factors contributing to curses in Ameru Community were many. It could be caused by disputes between children and parents, issues of land inheritance could create tension which if not well handled would invite curses. Failure to take care of the elderly could provoke communal curse especially from the elders. Disobedience to societal order, norms and fabric would invite curse to people among many other causes.

The occurrence of illnesses among the Igembe was perceived in various ways. Illness could be the work of witches and sorcerers who out of sheer jealousy or mystic compulsion caused pain, suffering and death in society. Illness could also occur due to natural causes. Illness caused by the work of a witch or witches were normally handled by a person called *Mwaa*, who had the power to remove or reverse witchcraft. Those that resulted from natural causes were handled by medicine men/women and herbalists who acted as doctors or medical practitioners. They usually would apply the use of herbs, tree roots and barks and natural fruits to attend to such illnesses. Occasionally the services of *Mwaa* would be sought when necessary. Payment for treatment of diseases was normally made in kind either in the form of a goat, honey or a brew. Elders were always on high alert to respond to and counter any form of afflictions that would confront the community. Always sacrifices would be offered to ward off such happenings in good time.

The Imenti

Worship

Religion is the single most important denominator in almost all human communities and plays a central role in governing and regulating human behaviour and relations. The Imenti people were extremely religious. Their ancestral God was called *Murungu* whom they worshipped at Lake Sayee, located at Kibiricha in Kenya. Other places of worship included mountains on which they believed their God resided and also under sacred trees. *Murungu* was referred to by other names such as *Mwene Inya*, *Kaimba*, *Gitije*, or *Ngai* [the God of rain]. Besides *Murungu*, the Imenti had a divine leader they referred to as *Mugwe*. There was deep reverence for the spirit of the living dead and hence the Imenti believed in offering sacrifices to their dead ancestors. Offering of sacrifices was a preserve for the elderly men. Women were excluded from this act of offering sacrifices. Sacrifices were offered to appease God and the ancestral spirits during times when the community faced great tribulations and pestilence. These included, but not limited to occasions of droughts, floods, inexplicable diseases and deaths to both humans and animals, locust invasions and other predators among a host of such similar occurrences.

Witchcraft and Curses

The practice of witchcraft existed among the Imenti but it was considered a vice. Witches [*Agaa*] did not mean well for the general good of the people as they could inflict sorrow and invite great suffering to their victims. They were as such detested and whenever witches were caught they were killed by members of the society. One way of eliminating witches was by putting them in a beehive and either burning them alive or rolling them down into river Kathita in Kenya. Njuri Ncheke council of elders oversaw such punishments. Evil spells cast by witches were always attended to by medicine men and in instances where the perpetrators were known they were compelled to reverse the curse before they were dealt with.

Curses were common among the Imenti and those with parental inclinations, particularly those from a father were revered because of their cross-generational effects. Showing disrespect to parents could solicit a curse, doing bad things or engaging in acts that went against societal norms and order like killing, rape, incest, beating parents, arson, stealing and such like misbehavior definitely invited curses on the offenders. Elders and special medicine men dealt with curses by offering sacrifices meant for atonement. It is important to note, however, that there were certain types of curses that whatsoever, remained irreversible.

The Tigania

Worship

All human societies believe in religion and African societies have been known to be highly religious. The Tigania and the Ameru in general also believed in the existence of a superior being. They believed that their God, *Murungu* or *Ngai Njiru* lived on the mountains, specifically on Mount Kenya and Nyambene hills in Kenya, hence they normally prayed facing those two mountains. There were shrines dedicated for worshipping God on the mountains and hill tops. They normally offered sacrifices on these shrines to ask for God's intercession whenever the community was faced with afflictions such as drought, famine, floods, diseases and inexplicable occurrences. Alongside *Murungu*, the Tigania also believed in ancestral spirits unto whom they offered sacrifices and libation for blessings, protection and forgiveness.

Offering of sacrifices and prayers in the shrines was always a preserve of a special group of elders. Women and the youth were excluded from such. Whenever need arose, the elders would sacrifice a blameless and spotless ram to God and the ancestors. The blood would be sprinkled and prayers offered. The meat from the sacrificed animal would then be roasted and eaten by the elders. The smoke from the bellowing fire was an indication that the sacrifice had been accepted by both God and the ancestors. Normally the reason for which the sacrifice was performed would be deemed solved, for instance, if it was because of drought then rain would come soon after. This applied to all problems that occasioned the offering of a sacrifice and prayer. It is important to note that prayers and sacrifices were not necessarily conducted when a calamity had happened in the community. Prayer for instance,

was part of daily life. Sacrifices would also be offered as preventive measures especially whenever diviners advised elders on the foreseeable future happenings. The role of diviners was taken very seriously among the Tigania because they were essentially fortune tellers. Said differently, they would know what to do in any life-threatening scenarios by averting any impending misfortunes and as such, ensure normalcy within the societal fabric.

Witchcraft and Curses

There were several reasons that could invite curses on an individual. Among the Tigania, failure to comply with and obey traditional norms which spelt out the do's and the don'ts of society could invite curse upon an individual. Instances like fighting a parent, abusing elders, committing arson, rape, incest, killing, neglecting parents in old age and other such like vices would invite curses from parents, elders and the community. Of all the curses, a father's curse was considered the worst. A child who fell victim of the father's curse would die or have a totally ruined future. His or her off springs would not flourish but face bad omen throughout their lives. Unless through the intervention by elders, a father's curse was irreversible. Where elders may have intervened, the reversal could only be done where the culprit owned up his sins and asked for forgiveness. Under such circumstances he or she offered an animal for sacrifice to atone for the sin. It is, however, important to note that in traditional Tigania society such happenings were very rare as everybody sought to be above reproach in matters of rules. The elders normally ensured that the societal tranquility and equilibrium was maintained through the observance of laws and traditions. Offences whether simple were punished to keep everyone in sync with the law and they very well worked to deter individuals from committing greater sins.

All respondents conceded that witchcraft existed among the Tigania. It existed in two categories. The first category of witches did not always mean well for the general good of the population. They caused great suffering and pain to their victims by soliciting mysterious illnesses upon them and which could result into death if not confronted in good time. This group of witches were not acceptable among the Tigania and whenever they were caught in their act they were always brought before the elders who forced them to reverse their actions. Because witchcraft was a vice, perpetrators were usually expelled or banished from the community by the elders. The second category consisted of witchdoctors. These were men and women endowed with mystical powers to cure illnesses caused either by witches or tribulations resulting from some unexplained and unknown sources. They acted as medicine men, herbalists and medical practitioners. Using herbs, roots, flowers and tree barks extracted from forests and applying various forms of paraphernalia the witch doctors could provide treatment to a whole range of diseases. In Tigania, they were called *Mugaa* and people ran to consult them whenever their services were required. The witchdoctors as such played a very significant role within the Tigania society. Many people also sought from them prophylaxis remedies to protect themselves from ailments. Payment offered to *Mugaa* was usually in kind either in the form of an animal, honey or grain. The *Mugaa*, working together with the elders, ensured the society was protected against the charms of witches.

The Igoji

Worship

The Igoji people just like any other community found in Africa believed in the existence of a superior being they called their God. Apparently, their God had more than one name. Some respondents referred to God as *Munyaga* while others called Him *Mulungu*. There was, however, a general consensus that the god worshipped by the Igoji people resided in *Kirimara* [Mount Kenya] and therefore called *Mulungu wa Kirimara* [God of Mount Kenya]. The Igoji people therefore normally prayed facing Mount *Kirimara*. They sacrificed to God to bestow blessings and good health upon the people together with their animals. They also supplicated God to bless the land upon which their livelihoods depended. Sacrifices were usually performed in the evenings by elders drawn from *Aga* and *Mugoire* clans. The Igoji had an institution of *Muuga* which played the role of a prophet and a medicine man. *Muuga* was always consulted whenever people were afflicted by calamities such as diseases, unexplained deaths to people and animals, drought, famine and floods among others. The Igoji believed in the existence of witchcraft and curses. Certain diseases and abnormal happenings were attributed to witchcraft and curses. The development of incurable skin sores [*Mkujji*] for instance, was one such case. The intervention of *Muuga* was always sought. He would perform a ritual [*Kulingia Kirumĩ*] to detect the nature of the curse and then offer a remedy for it. Many victims were treated but there were some that went beyond the ability of the *Muuga* to offer any form of help. It is also important to mention that apart from offering treatment to those afflicted, the *Muuga* was also relied upon to offer preventive prophylaxis to any would be future ailments that would emanate from witchcraft and curses. Treatment entailed the use of herbs, roots and the bark of trees carefully selected on the basis of their effectiveness. These were pounded and boiled and the solution administered to the patient in several ways.

The Mwimbi

Worship

Human beings believe in a supreme being. The Mwimbi believed in *Gaî Mwene nyaga* also known as *Mwene njerû* who resided on top of Mount Kenya (*Kirima Kirinyaga*). They also had diviners or traditional healers known as *mûgo* who would call upon *Mwene njerû* to cure the sick using magic (*mîthega*) when performing rituals. Besides this, *mûgo* served various roles such as prophets or spiritual leaders. They could detect and remove curses. For curse, removal or reversal, a he-goat would be slaughtered. Besides the *mûgo*, the Mwimbi also had special people called 'ago' who equally would remove curses. In some cases, for example during drought, elders would be called upon to perform sacrifices.

The Mwimbi revered shrines (*kîthitû*), in fact, no ordinary person could neither gain access to the shrine nor cut a tree within the place. This is because shrines were special areas designated for performing sacrifices to appease *Gaî*. Besides believing in a supreme being, they believed in ancestral spirits and would perform libations to appease the 'gods'. Further, among the Mwimbi, witchcraft was practised though, it was perceived as a vice synonymous with evil. More specifically, jealousy was designed to cause illness or death. As such, witches were detested and a *mûgo* or *ago* would be summoned to reverse curses using magic and some special herbs (*kamama*) made from roots, leaves or barks of trees to heal someone. They also had medicine men who made special medicine using the leaves of trees such as *mwîrî mûgûcwa* or *mûcuthî* to treat various ailments. The medicine men would be paid in kind for his services, for instance by giving him a goat or a brew made from honey (*ûkî*) in a special container called *kathiri* or they could be offered porridge (*ucuru*). It is important to note that illnesses were construed as a bad omen whose source would be either an individual or the community's misdeeds. In this regard, medicine men served as intermediates between the community and supreme beings. Besides this, the Mwimbi performed rituals in various circumstances such as to prevent enemy attacks, during droughts and other natural calamities or even when cursed. In the context of droughts, several clans would offer goats which would be slaughtered for sacrifice. They would remove *nkooro* from the goat and take them towards the windward direction.

The Muthambi

Worship

In all world religions, it is a truism that man believes in a supreme being. The Muthambi believed in God whom they referred to as *Ngai*. *Ngai* was worshipped in special shrines accessible by special or holy priests for prayers and sacrifices. The Muthambi society also had medicine men who were consulted to treat ailments such as measles. However, a disease such as leprosy demanded divine intervention. Illnesses were perceived as a normal phenomenon especially among the old who were the most vulnerable population. The young were seen as having strong immunity systems to withstand diseases. In cases where one failed to recover from an illness, it was attributed to witchcraft. Among the Muthambi, witchdoctors were feared because of their evil nature. They could bewitch people especially thieves and criminals. To ensure the continuity of the practice, witchdoctors were trained by their seniors on how to practice the craft. In fact, certain clans specialized in the practice making it hereditary. Hence, people desisted from interacting with them. Curse detection was evidenced in behaviour change of an individual. A case in point is when one contravenes societal norms, either a medicine man or a special trade-practitioner would be summoned to reverse the curse using herbs from forests. Thereafter special rituals would be performed during the curse removal process. Medicine men were consulted regularly and, more specifically during calamities. Medicine men also treated ailments such as measles, chicken pox, malaria and leprosy. They also aided women who lost children in infancy. In line with this, their husbands would slaughter goats to cleanse the homestead. It is important to note that not everyone would be a medicine man. It was "hereditary" and was culturally transmitted from one generation to another.

The Muthambi perceived the death of an old man as normal while a young man's death was attributed to witchcraft or a curse. When one died, his or her parents would shave their hair to dispel the spirit of death. Some Muthambi hold that they did not believe in life after death. Said differently, one's life ended immediately after his or her burial. Others stated that there was life after death since one's spirit goes to God, and just like the Mwimbi, they believed that the dead would appear in the dreams of family members and even communicate crucial issues through dreams. In connection to this, some held that spirit of the deceased would remain hovering around the homestead so as to protect those left behind.

The Tharaka

Worship

Belief in supreme beings is synonymous with the history of man. The Tharaka community worshipped *Mwene Nyaga/Mwene Kîrinyaga* who was believed to reside on top of *Kîrînyaga* (Mount Kenya) and would come to the community's aid during calamities such as drought. They therefore prayed while facing Mount Kenya and offered sacrifices in terms of livestock such as a goat or a black sheep to their god and afterwards it would eventually rain. They also believed in the intervention of ancestral spirits thus offered them sacrifices during calamities because their powers could impact on the lives of the living. The Tharaka equally believed in witchcraft. The craft was practised mostly by elders. Thus witchdoctors (*aragi*) were perceived as powerful. They equally had medicine men (*agao*) who used *mbûgû* (these are unique seeds placed in a special guard and are used for divination), detect curses and reverse curses by tying a sheep's tongue or frog around the neck of the cursed individual. Among the Tharaka, one could be cursed by elders for being violent, unruly or disobedient. Cursed people were perceived as either immoral or indisciplined, or were unable to sire children. Further, a cursed person would either be insane or useless and was feared by the rest of the community. Curse removal/reversals would demand services of a medicine man (*mûragûri*) who would require some goats or even a black chicken. It is important to note that there were some irreversible curses and these were labelled *chinu*, in fact, the Tharaka had different curses such as *kûrîrîkandûûka* (which are curses pronounced especially by the old to people who wronged them, for example thieves or witchdoctors). Besides reversing curses, medicine men cured ailments, by using roots and leaves of plants to make traditional medicine (*kuragura*). They could also cure ailments affecting the larger community since they believed that there were relatively very few diseases caused by natural causes hence, most were attributed to witchcraft. Illnesses were perceived differently. Diseases were considered as bad omen, or punishment for one's evil deeds. In the context of plagues, medicine men would plant something known as *mîrigî* across the road to deter the disease from spreading across other villages. In such cases, the sick would be isolated. The medicine men also served as fortune tellers or diviners and could predict one's future by using the blood of a goat. For the Tharaka, witchcraft was part and parcel of their culture, since it was used to predict the future, forewarn the community of an imminent disaster, harm others and heal bewitched people. Besides the medicine men, there were also diviners or fortune tellers (*kîroria*) who could predict the future and prepared magic spells used to protect the community during war, or to dispel evil spirits, treat mysterious ailments and so on.

Just like in the case of illnesses being attributed to witchcraft, the Tharaka dismissed the concept of natural death since death could not be delinked from witchcraft. Generally in relation to death, the Tharaka believed that their departed relatives could appear in their dreams. Moreover, through naming children after departed relatives or ancestors, their memories were kept alive throughout their lineage.

The Chuka

Worship

The Chuka, just like the Mwimbi, Tharaka and Muthambi believed in a Supreme being named *Mwene nyaga* (the God of Kirinyaga) or *Mwene njiru* (the moon) to whom they offered a goat for sacrifice. Other forms of worship, especially for daily protection entailed invoking the god of their forefathers, known as *Njeru* during the day and night. During rainy seasons, they would appoint a *Muntu mugoo* (an elderly man who was a medicine man or a healer) to perform sacrifices to their god. The Chuka had sacred places called *irî* visited by only special people. Two schools of thought emerged about their belief in ancestral spirits, one holds that they did not believe in ancestral spirits and whenever they appeared in people's dreams they would be chased away. Another school of thought posits that they believed in ancestral spirits and performed libations by pouring water or food to appease ancestors. This was to prevent any harm from befalling the community. Furthermore, traditionally, within any Chuka homestead, the father was expected to sleep very late after everyone had slept so that he gives special thanks to *Njeru* by proclaiming the following words; *Njeru I thank you for being with us this day* and after waking up, he would recant the same in the morning.

The Chuka like the Mwimbi, the Muthambi and Tharaka believed in witchcraft, and the person to cleanse a bewitched person was either the *Ago* or *kuriba* (a healer/medicine man) or *muntu mugoo*. The latter would request for a goat as a mode of payment for services rendered. Prolonged ailments leading to death were attributed to witchcraft. *Muntu mugoo* had numerous roles such as healing people as well as the entire community. He could repulse evil spirits hovering around the community. Members of the community would meet at a designated place for cleansing rituals. *Muntu mugoo* equally treated ailments such as *muleria/mutigiri/musyûkia* (these were terms used in reference to contagious diseases such as leprosy). They were also consulted to perform sacrifices during calamities such as drought.

There were medicine men who like the *Muntu mugoo* treated ailments such as *mutigiri*, *musyûkia* and *mongo* using leaves, roots and barks of specific trees. For instance, *matû mwenu* was used to treat malaria while *mûmanku* treated diarrhoea. They would request their clients to mix their bathing water with some herbs and leaves to be cured. Those with either inexplicable or incurable ailments would be taken to a special place called *kaîgî* where they would be fed in seclusion and attempts to dispel the spirit of death in the family would be made. An old sick person would be accorded special treatment called *kûribwa* and from experience, people were able to judge whether death was inevitable for the old ailing man; hence his wealth would be divided among his family members. Unfortunately, if the old man died, it was associated with their aging. However, for a young ailing person, a witchdoctor would be called to perform a ritual called *kûriba* to diagnose the problem and in case the young person died it was linked to witchcraft. Moreover, elders would assemble to ponder over the person who was responsible for taking the soul of a young person. They would then assemble the whole village to take an oath and perform a ritual called *kuringia mbugu* so as to identify the culprit.

A deceased person or one whose health was quickly deteriorating while at *kaîgî* would be taken away by *Muntu mugoo*. This was to cleanse the family from the spirit of death and during this time, the family was perceived as unclean and had to remain indoors to bar them from interacting with other members of the community. The cleansing by *muntu mugoo* entailed members of the family taking a bath in the river while facing the direction of the course of the river. Therefore the *muntu mugoo* performed the duties of an undertaker and a medicine man.

Conclusion

In line with previous discussions, the introductory literature exploring key aspects on African Traditional Religion is consistent with the Ameru system of worship as highlighted below:

One, the Ameru community believed in a supreme being who was accorded numerous titles across the Ameru dialects. For instance, he was referred to as *Kinikiro* (Mwegwe) (Igembe), *Murungu/Mwene inya*, *Ngai Njiru* (Tigania), *Murungu* (Imenti), *Munyanga/Mulungu* (Igoji), *Mwene nyaga* (Chuka), *Gai Mwene nyaga/Mwene njeru* (Mwimbi), *Ngai* (Muthambi) and *Mwene nyaga/Mwene Kîrinyaga* (Tharaka).

Second, in the Ameru culture, God's humble abode was in the visible world and not in the invisible world as in other cultures. This is because his dwelling place was either at the apex of Mount Kenya (*Kirima Kîrinyaga*) (particularly for the Igoji, Mwimbi, Muthambi, Tharaka and Chuka) or the top of Nyambene hills (especially for the Igembe and Tigania). Therefore, the Ameru worshipped their God while either facing Mt. Kenya or Nyambene hills in Kenya. Besides the mountains, there were shrines, forests, swamps and sacred trees designated for worship and sacrifices.

Third, the Ameru cosmology catered for ancestral spirits tasked with the duty of watching over the living. For the Muthambi and Tharaka, ancestral spirits would communicate with the living through dreams. The powers of ancestral spirits could be manifested in good times and during calamities; therefore, they could be appeased by either performing sacrifices or pouring libations. In a way, ancestors were venerated as they offered blessings, atonement and protection to the living in the Ameru culture. To conserve the memories of their ancestors, the Tharaka could name their children after their ancestors.

Fourth, the Ameru culture had diviners, medicine men and witch doctors. Some Ameru dialects such as the Imenti had a diviner known as *Mugwe* whereas the Igoji had *Muuga*. The two served as fortune tellers. It is important to note that in the Ameru culture, distinguishing between diviners and medicine men is a herculean task since most Ameru dialects such as Tharaka, Igembe, Tigania, Mwimbi and Muthambi had medicine men with supernatural powers that enabled them perform divinations. Medicine men had numerous titles in the Ameru culture such as *Muuga* (Igoji), *Mûgo* (Mwimbi), *Agao* (Tharaka) and *Muntu mugoo* (Chuka). They had predefined roles such as treating ailments, reversing curses, exorcism, performing sacrifices, ritual cleansing, predicting calamities, offering sacrifices, officiating oath taking and for the Chuka medicine men served as undertakers who were tasked with the duty of disposing corpses. Medicine men could be paid in kind for the services rendered in the form of a goat, honey, grains or brew made from honey (*ûki* among the Mwimbi). At this stage, it is imperative to clarify certain roles of medicine men. One, in all Ameru dialects especially when medicine men were treating ailments, they used herbs obtained from barks of trees, roots and leaves. Two, alongside medicine men, some Ameru dialects such as Imenti, Tigania and Igoji (particularly elders from *Aga* or *Mugoire* clans) also relied on elders to perform sacrifices.

Witchdoctors also existed in the Ameru culture and they were perceived negatively. This is because they used their powers to inflict harm on the living by causing recurring misfortunes, prolonged ailments, poor yields or even sudden death of a youthful person. This means that witchcraft was enshrined in the Ameru culture. For the Imenti, one could either be banished or killed by being placed in a beehive or burnt alive for practicing sorcery. Among the Muthambi, witchcraft would either be hereditary or one would be recruited into the craft by his family who could be notorious for practising the vice, a case in point is the case of the Muthambi where certain clans specialize in witchcraft. Spells cast on unsuspecting persons would be reversed by medicine men.

In relation to curses, among the Igembe and Imenti, a father's curse was the most revered. Some of the reasons advanced for being cursed include immorality, disrespectfulness, a trouble maker, and criminal activities, among others. In conclusion, the Ameru system of worship undeniably paints a true representation of the portrait of the African traditional religion, which the Ameru share with most traditional African societies.

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