
Christophe Sékène Diouf  
Gaston Berger University of Saint-Louis, Senegal

Abstract

This paper explores the effects of missionaries’ opposition to African cultures which led to the creation of Independent Churches. It mainly focuses on Kenyan colonial history. These facts are incorporated in Ngugi’s novel: *A Grain of Wheat*. In this literary work, The Independent Churches reflect the difficulties that the autochthones are confronted with while deciding to conciliate two different cultures. These Churches express a religious resistance. During colonization, the guardians of the traditions who discovered the new religion, Christianity, faced the missionaries’ Churches by setting up Independent Churches. This article takes into consideration many aspects related to people’s realities especially in the religious domain. Thus, the contribution of this study is to lay the stress on the role that the Independent Churches played in the empowerment of African cultures. This work also underscores the cultural effects such as religious syncretism stemming from the mixture between Christian elements and African traditions.

Key words: cultures, Independent Churches, Gikuyu, liberation, religious syncretism.
Introduction

Religious conflicts constitute major problems throughout the world and particularly in the African continent. In spite of the initiatives taken by organizations like the United Nations Organization, these situations continue to raise several questions. People become more and more worried about the persisting religious conflicts in the globalized world. Many nations face such undercurrent phenomena. The religious conflicts in Nigeria and Central Africa can be good illustrations. They encourage us to re-examine the religious resistance in Kenya through A Grain of Wheat.

Indeed, in this analysis, it is of paramount importance to unveil the basic causes of the rupture from missionaries’ Churches, the characteristics of the Independent Churches, and show their surviving elements. Taking into consideration all these facts, it is worth mentioning that the questions of differences are at the core of the religious resistance in A Grain of Wheat. In other words, the Independent Churches are a turning point in the history of Christianity in Kenya.

This paper proposes to highlight that the Independent Churches represented strategies of resistance for cultural liberation. On the one hand, it is useful to describe the rupture from missionaries and the appropriation of the Bible. On the other hand, the emphasis is put on the religious syncretism as a signpost of the brewing between Christianity and Gikuyu traditions. As a theoretical framework, the concepts of restoration and re-appropriation of Postcolonialism is essential. This methodology will guide our study to better understand the ways the members of the Independent Churches fight in opposition to the persisting process of subjugation. It shows that Gikuyu whose children have been barred from attending the missionaries’ schools are committed to dismantle the colonial discourses.

From rupture with missionaries to the appropriation of the Bible

In Kenya, the causes of the break with the missionaries dated back in 1928. To persuade the new faithful to Christianity to give up the clidectomy, the missionaries decreed the non admission of the children who practiced that rite in their schools. As a consequence, there was a division within the Gikuyu community. One group was devoted to observe the clidectomy rite (female circumcision) while another accepted to renounce the practice. The Gikuyu Independent Churches testify the dissension with the missionaries. They are the intrinsic consequences of the prohibition of certain customs like the initiation rites of girls, particularly the circumcision. Daniel Bournaud explains the cultural resistance of Gikuyu to missionaries:

The resistance to the State appears to be all the more powerful as it leans on the affirmation of a cultural identity. The conflict about the clidectomy that opposes Kikuyu and European shows this care of authenticity face to the stranger, the other. By refusing to give up the clidectomy of young girls, the Kikuyu society preserves it essential values and rejects the Europeanization of customs promoted by the missionaries (Bournaud, 1991: 20).

In A Grain of Wheat, the churchmen regarded the practices of circumcision as non-conformity with the precepts of the Gospel. According to them, the faithful people can never keep on following their ancestral customs. Hence, was the decision of the guardians of traditions to break with the missionaries’ Churches and found their own Churches. From this perspective, they claimed for a Christian spirituality rooted in African beliefs. They aimed at renewing the religious practices and adjusting cultural elements with the expression of their
faith. Besides, the Independent Gikuyu Churches departed from the missionaries who came to spread Christianity in the colonized lands. They are the environment where the religious resistance becomes a weapon in the service of the downtrodden. They contest missionaries’ bigotry:

The reaction of Independent Churches is characterized by the affirmation of the necessary tribal and comminatory rooting of the believer through an effective and daily solidarity. They return to ancestors, founder reference of the community (Metogo, 1985: 87).

In A Grain of Wheat, an important aspect which characterizes the Gikuyu Independent Churches is the religious autonomy. In the religious resistance, the new Reverend Jackson Kingori is the leading charismatic figure. The Church of Scotland School represents the direct rupture from the missionaries Churches. The reverend teaches Christian precepts. He has recourse to sermons to better reinforce religious resistance. He preaches by insisting on the concept of God in Christianity as well as in Gikuyu. From his angle of announcing the Gospel to the new adepts of the Church of Scotland School, he calls for an appropriation of the Bible. According to him, the missionaries have betrayed Christianity to ally with colonizers. He notes that, in terms of belief, Ngai, the Gikuyu God is synonymous of the same God professed in the Bible: “Ngai, the Gikuyu God, is the same One God who sent Chris, the son, to come and lead the way from darkness into the light” (83). By making a parallel between ‘Ngai, the Gikuyu God‘ (83) and the God taught in the Bible, Reverend Jackson tries to debunk the ideology of missionaries according to which African people believe in many gods. He points out that his people are profoundly religious. The Reverend emphasizes the necessity to re-establish the truth. In this respect, religious elements are used to stress cultural resistance. Laurenti Magesa quotes Samuel G. Kibicho in these terms:

Samuel G. Kibicho, for instance shows the role that the Gikuyu conception of God (Ngai) played in their struggle against colonialism in the 1950’s and how it has been an important factor in their response to Christian evangelization from the beginning (Magesa, 1997: 8).

In A Grain of Wheat, the Kikuyu Greek Orthodox Church represents another example of the Gikuyu Independent Churches in Kenya. However, the main preoccupation of this Church resides in the restoration of the lost lands to Kenyan peasants. Moreover, the problem of the lands taken by the British colonizers is one of the causes that separate Gikuyu Christians from certain converted natives and missionaries’ Churches. The Kenyan revolutionary struggle has an impact on the religious field. Gikuyu Independent Churches join the fight to improve workers’ and peasants’ living conditions. The fate of the downtrodden becomes part of the preoccupations of these Churches. As far as they are concerned, the leading figures of Independent Churches believe that it is a religious obligation to collude with the exploited masses. Even though that the clidectomy was the immediate consequence of the cultural resistance, the land question takes a basic place in the history of Gikuyu Independent Churches. To grasp the land property, it will be useful to quote Patrick Williams:

The effect of the British land grabbing was to turn many Kenyan-above all the Gikuyu, Ngugi’s people, who lived in the White Highlanders-into ahoi, landless tenants farmers, working for others or rending their land. Ngugi’s father was one of these. To the British, this was partly an unavoidable consequence, but it was also partly deliberate policy: to the extent that Kenyan worked for a wage or became part of the money economy-rather than living off their own produce, or what they exchanged that produce for-they
became subject to greater economic control by the British (Williams, 1962: 2).

All these things considered, one can understand why the members of the Kikuyu Greek Orthodox Church tried to contribute to the struggle for the recovery of the lands from the British colonizers. To show their firm opposition to missionaries and colonizers, they participated in mass movements and protest against the heavy taxes and the theft of lands. They also incite masses to organize themselves for a better liberation. For instance, during meetings, the Reverend prays for the emancipation of Kenyan people and the end of oppression and exploitation. To this regard, the narrator declares:

Nyamu now called upon the Rev. Morris Kingori to open the meeting, with a prayer. Before 1952, Kingori was a renowned preacher in the Kikuyu Greek Orthodox Church, one of the many independent churches that had broken with the missionary establishment (217).

The sermons remain an essential means reinforcing the struggle in the Kikuyu Greek Orthodox Church. This Independent Church plays a key role in the fight against the system of colonial exploitation on the one hand, and religious oppression, on the other hand. The Reverend Morris Kingori addresses the crowd through sermons to encourage the masses and infuse them with pride and determination in their way towards liberation from the burden of colonialism. He relies on sermons to help them rally together in order to achieve their emancipation. It this perspective, before the beginning of every meeting, fighters call upon him for prayers. In these occasions, the Reverend contextualizes Kenyan people’s fate. He appropriates the biblical history of Exodus. He compares Kenyan people to the enslaved Hebrews in Egypt, Pharaoh’s land. Sermons are important in the rupture from missionaries and the re-appropriation of the Bible. Through them, the members who are attached to the Independent Churches celebrate the struggle for social justice. Thus, we point out that oppressed people can feel a certain sense of hope in their quest for liberation. The latter is symbolically a depiction of the improvement of their lives:

Oh God of Isaac and Abraham, the journey across the desert is long. We are without water, we are without food, and our enemies followed behind us riding chariots and on horseback, to take us back to Pharaoh. For they are loth to let your people go, are angered to the heart to see your people go. But with guidance, Lord, we shall surely reach and walk on Canaan’s shore (218).

Another basic aspect is that in the Independent Churches, spirituality has consoled the suffering people. It has been an important source of motivation. Through sermons, religious leaders have contributed to reinforce the determination of the victims of domination. They empower them above all when the moral and physical forces are reduced. In A Grain of Wheat, to better understand “the break with the missions” (218), we can quote Simon Gikandi when he states:

Furthermore In 1928, when the Church of Scotland Mission demanded that all it members renounce clidectomy as a condition of their continuation membership in the Church, a large number of athomi balking, breaking away to form their own independent Churches. The Christian community in Central Kenya thus came to be divided between those who had agreed to sign a pledge renouncing clidectomy and the others (this group which labeled itself Gikuyu Kararing’a (pure Gikuyu). The objective of the latter group was in the words of its manifest, “to further interests of the Kikuyu and its
members and to safeguard the homogeneity of such interests relating to their spiritual, economic, social, educational upliftment (Gikandi, 2000: 22).

In the light of this assertion, it is worth underlining the place of Independent Churches in the resistance particularly in periods of excessive exploitation and oppression. For instance, in America, the Separatist Churches had greatly taken part in the fight for the emancipation of the black community that was subordinate to the system of segregation or Jim Crow laws. In their quest for true dignity, the religious songs were considerably useful. The spirituals were of paramount importance during segregationist laws. They strengthened and helped the suffering people overcome hard living conditions and be confident that the sun of justice would shine. Like the sermons in A Grain of Wheat, the spirituals had profoundly expressed the feelings of the oppressed:

Spirituality accompanied theology, and the spirituals reveal the slaves’ deep personal and collective faith. Tied to this was a surprisingly hopeful optimism, which transcended the wretchedness of the slave experience (Newman, 2005: 1777).

In addition to the reinforcement of masses’ courage, the Independent Churches react against the stereotypes. The founding leaders of the Independent Churches feel that they are invested with the mission to rehabilitate the customs denigrated by some missionaries and colonizers. Their Churches sensitize the Kenyan masses and draw their attention concerning the ancestral traditions. Leaders of the Independent Churches strive to relieve people from the yoke of the sufferings. They invite Kenyan social strata to follow their traditional beliefs. They disapprove any rejection of the bonds which link them with their past and land. In other words, they are deeply attached to their customs and traditions. In respect, John Mbiti points out:

Independent Churches are in an attempt to ‘find place to feel at home’, not only in worship but in the whole profession and expression of Christian faith. Beneath the umbrella of independent churches, African Christians can freely shed their tears, voice their sorrows, present their spiritual and physical needs, respond to the world in which they live and empty selves before God (Mbiti, 1969: 228).

In A Grain of Wheat, the character of Harry Thuku is portrayed as a charismatic leader who backs the foundation of the Independent Schools and the Independent Churches. As mentioned in the novel, it is under his leadership that these institutions widespread throughout the Kenyan country. He is even considered as a messiah because his messages convey hope to the oppressed. He denounces the exploitation of his people by the British colonial power. He guides a revolutionary movement that makes people praise his deeds in the Gikuyu Independent Churches:

They talked of him in their homes; they sang his praises in teashops, market places and on their way to Gikuyu Independent churches on Sundays. Any word from the mouth of Harry became news and passed from ridge to ridge, right across the country. People waited for something to happen. The revolt of the peasant was near at hand (13).

In the same order of contesting missionaries and colonizers’ opposition to the expansion of Independent Schools, nationalists such as Harry Thuku appear in A Grain of Wheat as one of the pioneers who play a key role in their wide spreading. The character of Thuku is one of the most mythic figures who challenge colonizers in Ngugi’s literary works. He awakens the
Religious syncretism: a factor of cultural mixture

In A Grain of Wheat, some characters evolve in an environment marked by a religious syncretism. In the Gikuyu Independent Churches, the religious syncretism constitutes a distinctive aspect. Characters combine traditional cultures with Christian principles. By breaking with missionaries’ Churches, members incorporate some elements of their cultures and customs in the religious manifestations of Independent Churches. In their conservatism, they advocate the preservation of Gikuyu cultures. They identify these Churches with the local color. In other words, the traditional religious elements take an important place. To this point, the narrative voice explains the ways Jackson celebrates religion in his Independent Church: “Jackson would reason out, trying to show that the Christian faith had roots in the very traditions revered by the Gikuyu” (83). This quotation depicts the form of religious syncretism characterizing Gikuyu Independent Churches. They underline the mixture of the Gikuyu culture with the Christian religion. Religious syncretism includes borrowing from both systems of beliefs.

The option for the syncretism can be examined as a challenge to the European culture. Indeed, given that the evangelized people cannot totally liberate themselves from the cultural heritage of Christianity, they find solution in religious syncretism. They are compelled to adopt it. Facing the endeavors of acculturation undertaken by colonizers, the Independent Churches are regarded as necessary alternatives. Consequently, religious syncretism borrows from Gikuyu and Christianity. In this regard, Richard Laurent Omba observes: “the contact between Christianity, animism and traditional religions results from a sort of religious syncretism” (Omba, 2005: 287).

The following words from Muthoni in The River Between are illustrative of the aspects of religious syncretism: “I am still a Christian in the tribe. Look. I am a woman and will grow big and healthy in the tribe” (61). In her spiritual life, Muthoni decides to be reconciliated with her tribe as well as the Christian religion. She can’t favor her Christianity to the detriment of her tribal custom that invites her to follow the passage from girlhood to adulthood.

However, among the major reasons of the foundation of Independent Churches, we assert that liberation from cultural assimilation is given priority. The religious resistance fights for the orientation of Christianity to the natives’ cultures. It conveys resistance against the loss of the religious roots inherited from the elders of the tribe. To avoid the disappearance of customs and traditions, certain characters take shelter in religious syncretism. It emphasizes an “enculturation: indigenization of Christianity” (my translation) (Tonda, 2010: 88). This statement reflects the cultural reality of Independent Churches. The latter are rooted in the indigenous culture in order to better maintain the contacts with African traditions.

In fact, in A Grain of Wheat, Ngugi portrays the religious syncretism that significantly affects the characters’ belonging to the Independent Churches. He gives an overview of the metamorphosis of their identities. The theme of the religious syncretism varies from one character to another but, this study focuses mainly on its presence in the Independent
Churches to note that characters who try to resist cultural alienation take shelter in a religious syncretism. They somehow combine Christianity and religious traditions. Most of them sustain the necessity to harmonize the practices. They deny any exhaustive absorption of missionaries’ teachings.

Religious syncretism becomes the bridge that connects Gikuyu to Christianity in the Independent Churches. Indeed, members are shared between ancestral beliefs and the Gospel. On the subject of such a situation, Mohamadou Kane argues: “Most often the novelists, where survives the faith, emphasize a form of syncretism that conciliates the tradition and the contributions of the other religions” (my translation) (Kane, 1982: 432).

In the contact between missionaries and Gikuyu is born a religious syncretism. In A Grain of Wheat, the characters do not accept to turn back to their cultures and traditions while embracing the new religion. As a reality in their daily practices, syncretism functions as an undercurrent feature in the revolutionary ideology of characters. It manifests itself in the initiation: “They mixed Christmas hymns with songs and dances performed during initiation rites when boys and girls are circumcised into responsibility as men and women” (204). This celebration clearly reveals that in the novel, it is a synthesis of religious values. It is noticeable that Christian melodies are integrated in the ritual ceremony of the Gikuyu tribe. In this performance, the mixture of cultural elements from Gikuyu and biblical allusions emphasizes the syncretic nature of some characters. Moreover, religious syncretism goes hand in hand with the nationalism. It is not only reduced to Independent Churches. It participates in the praise of the Independence. It is worth mentioning that religious syncretism epitomizes the unity of masses to celebrate the accession of their nation to sovereignty.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the issue of religious resistance in A Grain of Wheat has been the major point discussed in this present study. Through this novel, the subject matter analyzed is the opposition of Gikuyu to missionaries’ religious education that prohibits the practice of certain customs like the clitidectomy (female circumcision). Thus, it has been pointed out that the Gikuyu Independent Churches side with the Independent Schools in the resistance against the acculturation. They defend the cultural values of their tribe. They are environments of the contestation against religious indoctrination. They are established in accordance with the cultural realities of Gikuyu in particular and African people in general. In the quest for liberation, they break with the missionaries’ Churches, contextualize biblical tenets and give impetus to the affirmation of local identity. The Independent Churches have been founded as cornerstones of the liberating strategies. In the controversies concerning customs and traditions, they appear as responses to the cultural domination.

This paper concludes that a symbiosis between Gikuyu culture and Christianity is a significant aspect of the religious syncretism which permeates characters’ lives that search for a cultural reconciliation. However, today, in a cross-cultural world, all these facts lead us to re-examine the crucial issues such as religious fundamentalism, radicalism, religious conflicts, and revolutionary religious movements to name but a few related to the different conceptions of religion. The essential question we can raise is: how can people promote mutual understanding and religious tolerance for a peaceful world? This can be achieved through a respect of cultural differences and an enhancing of Inter-culturality.
References


