African Spirituality and the Environment: Case of the *Agĩkũyũ*

Githuku Sammy

St. Paul's University

Abstract

This article describes how the Agĩkũyũ religious beliefs, cultural practices, peasant farming at the turn of the 19th century enabled them to conserve and live in harmony with their environment. The affinity of the Agĩkũyũ with the environment permeated every area of their ecosystem resulting to a harmonious coexistence of people, animals and plants. The paper further illustrates how under the British rule destruction of the environment was first initiated. With the introduction of new culture, laws, religion, policies and system of Government, the Agĩkũyũ eventually abandoned their religious beliefs and practices leading to the destruction of the environment. The paper ends with a critic of the Agĩkũyũ traditional religious beliefs for their inability to replenish a destroyed environment. The paper recommends a re-reading of the Biblical texts that are claimed to sanction destruction of the environment.

Key Words: African Spirituality, Agĩkũyũ Religious Beliefs, Environment, Destruction

Introduction

More than a hundred years since Kenya was first under the British administration, the *Agĩkũyũ* country, in which the inhabitants lived intimately with their environment, is now a depleted county. This destruction is a result of several factors: destruction of traditional African heritage, the policies of pre-independent government, climate change and human activity. The British Government governed Kenya between 1895-1920 as a Protectorate and 1920 -1963 as a colony. During this era, the administration introduced a new culture, religion and technology that did not honour the coexistence of the people and their environment. The government systematically publicised western culture and education under the deceptive official narrative of "bettering"

African cultures (Mackenzie, 2000, p. 700). "Superior" European way of life, new plants and foods such as coffee trees, tea plants, wheat, barley, Irish potatoes and maize were introduced (Wolff, 1970, p. 276). The Europeans also introduced firearms, advanced farming tools and market for wild life products. With time, the British system of administration affected every aspect of *Agĩkũyũ* life. Steadily the traditional heritage weakened, and the *Agĩkũyũ* desire of European education and commodities became the conduit through which respect and reverences of the environment was destroyed. Gradually the *Agĩkũyũ* become dependent on European goods, culture and language. They adopted the European crops, systems of farming and technology prescribed for the colony. Christianity, the religion of the new rulers became the religion of most of the subjects.

This article examines how the *Agĩkũyũ* religious beliefs and customs before the arrival of the British rule 1895 -1963 treated the environment with honor and respect and preserved it for posterity. It shows how indigenous religious beliefs on forests, animals, mountains, and farming

contributed to the conservation of the environment.

This article is organised into four sections. In section one, the *Agĩkũyũ* people, country and religion are described. In section two, there is an illustration demonstrating how the *Agĩkũyũ* world view, creation story, beliefs on forests, world animals, land tenure, were in harmony with creation. In section three, the paper shows how the pre-independent government destroyed African spirituality leading to the current state. In section four, the writer discusses the possibility of borrowing a leaf from the African traditional religion and spirituality as a means of mitigating the current destruction of the environment.

This paper uses multiple of approaches: ethnography, oral history and anthropology to construct the *Agĩkũyũ* beliefs on their environment. The writer consults the first documented literary sources of the *Agĩkũyũ* indigenous spirituality to demonstrate how traditional religion was in harmony with the environment. There is relatively little research on indigenous African religious beliefs and the environment. There are hardly any survivors alive who lived this spirituality. This study therefore, draws from the earliest written reports and papers of the first missionaries, explorers and pre-independent administrators.

The *Agĩkũyũ* are a Bantu people who by the 19th century had migrated and settled in central Kenya. Their initial country is the present Kiambu, Muranga, Nyeri and Kirinyaga counties. Their culture was similar in many ways to that of their neighbours: the Akamba, the Embu and the Ameru. Today, like other communities in Kenya they are spread in all counties. At the arrival of the Europeans and at the beginning of the twentieth century, the *Agĩkũyũ* were peasant farmers who kept sheep and goats. According to Leakey (1934, p. 59) the *Agĩkũyũ* were initially hunters who turned into agriculturists. Their social organisation was centered on patrilineal kinship. They

resided in dispersed homesteads, usually situated along ridges, in the highlands with abundant rainfall and fertile soils.

The initial country was a mountainous landscape scaling an altitude of 1000 to 2500 meters above the sea level. The country was admirable and everything lived in harmony with everything else. The following documented testimonies by the pioneering European explorers, missionaries and administrators give a glimpse of their original county. The whole land was composed of highlands, observed Tate (1904, p. 131). Leakey, a missionary at Kabete, described the country as a land of "very favourable climate and beautiful scenery" (Leakey, 1934, p. 59). The initial land was beautiful, with fertile soils and abundant rainfall (Leakey, 1934; McGlashan, 1964; Routledge, 1910). Perlo, a pioneering Roman Catholic missionary in central Kenya describes his first sight of Mount Kenya as "breathtaking" (Perlo, 1952, p. 23). Bewes a missionary in Kenya in 1929 described Mount Kenya as "the loveliest mountain in the world" (Bewes, 1953, p.203), while Mackinder (1930, p. 530) wrote "what a beautiful mountain Kenya is, graceful, as it seems to me with a cold feminine beauty". Like most of the country the Kikuyu country was home to large herds of wild animals (Mwaura, 2016, p. 130). The *Agĩkũyũ* occupied the mid-hills leaving the plains for the wild animals and the top third of the mountains to the forests and home to the human spirits. Before the arrival of Protectorate Administration, the *Agĩkũyũ* lived alongside forests and among wildlife without the current electric fences, policies and legislations. Their harmonious coexistence with their environment was best described by Crawshay:

> …. during the daytime guinea fowl flew up into the fig trees overhanging our camp, to sit there pluming themselves or roosting in absolute indifference to what was going on below, with men talking and moving about, and fires burning. In the sweet-potato plantations on the opposite bank of the river francolins could be seen craning their necks and listening, or scratching for food, within a stone's-throw of natives digging potatoes or weeding. It seemed nothing short of sacrilege to fire a shot in such a sanctuary as this. (1902, p. 41).

Mbiti (1969, p. 1) observes that African religion permeates all departments of life so completely that it is not possible to isolate it. The *Agĩkũyũ* religion infused every aspect on their environment. This exerted the great influence upon the thinking, attitudes and the way of life of the people (Wamue, 2001, p. 456). Customs, and laws, land tenure, and religion were closely intertwined (Bewes, 1953, p. 53). They were expressed in beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and traditional religious experts. The *Agĩkũyũ* lived in accord with their environment for hundreds of years, without the current Government policy (National Environment Policy, 2013).

Their relationship with their environment was guided by their sacred beliefs. The knowledge and their integration of their environment led them to view it from a religious and materialistic perspective. They developed cultural customs, religious beliefs, tales, sayings, creation stories, and taboos that enabled them live sustainably with their environment. The kinship between them and their environment was expressed through songs, rituals, taboos and naming.

The place of environment is most vividly expressed in the *Agĩkũyũ* creation story. The first man (G*ĩkũyũ*) was created by God (*Ngai*) and settled under a tree called *mũkũyũ* (*moraceae*).This *Agĩkũyũ* "Eden" is called *mũkũrwe-inĩ wa nyagathanga*. Today this sacred groove near Murang"a town is a national monument and a cultural heritage site under National Museums of Kenya.

Mũkũrwe (*mimosaceae*) is a tree and *Gathanga* is a bird. Traditions say that the tree was nested by hundreds of these birds. The chameleon and a bird called *nyamidigi* were *Ngai's* messengers to the first man at the cradle.

The chameleon, sent with a message of eternal life to G*ĩkũyũ,* the *Agĩkũyũ* "Adam", took a long time to reach *mũkũrwe wa nyagathanga*. *Ngai* became impatient with the chameleon and sent *nyamidigi* with the message of death. The bird flew fast, overtook the chameleon and delivered

the message of death to G*ĩkũyũ. Ngai* is the creator of humanity, animals, plants, mountains and rivers. *Ngai*"s earthly habitation is within the human environment at the peak of Mount Kenya. This creation story demonstrates the kinship between God (*Ngai),* animals and the *Agĩkũyũ*. Unlike the biblical creation story, where enmity was initiated between Eve, her posterity and the snake; "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed" (Gen 3:15), no hostility is put between G*ĩkũyũ* and the chameleon.

In the *Agĩkũyũ* spirituality, both domestic and wild animals occupy an important place. The *Agĩkũyũ* people are named after animals as an expression of likeness between animals and human beings. This is also a demonstration of fondness and identification with animals. People and animals are related to one another and both wild and domesticated animals are treated with respect and compassion. The wild animals are partners sharing the same environment with human beings. The *Agĩkũyũ* did not kill animals for sport. This positive outlook on domestic and wild animals, birds, reptiles, vegetation and physical features resulted in sharing names and characteristics as if they were one specimen. We shall consider a few examples. First, the *Agĩkũyũ* named their children after domesticated and wild animals.

(a) Male *Agĩkũyũ* names derived from names of wild animals:

Ngarĩ (leopard), Nguru (tortoise), Hiti (hyena), Wanũgũ or Nũgũ (baboon), Nguyo (Colubus monkey), Njogu (elephant), Tũiga (giraffe) Mbogo (buffalo), Njoka (snake) Mbũkũ (rabbit), Ngatia (lion).

(b) Male *Agĩkũyũ* names derived from names of birds:

Ngoru (kite), Kanyoni (bird), Nyaga (ostritch), Nderi or Wanderi (vulture), Ngũkũ (chicken).

(c) Male *Agĩkũyũ* names derived from names of domestic animals:

Ngombe (cow), Njaũ (Calf), Ndegwa (bull). Mwatĩ (ewe), Thenge (he-goat) Female *Agĩkũyũ* names derived from those of wild animals:

(d) Wangarĩ (leopard), Ngĩma (monkey). The Zebra irrespective of its gender is known by a female name Wambũi murĩndũ.

e) Male *Agĩkũyũ* names derived from names of environmental physical features:

Warũi (river), Kahiga (rock), Kĩrĩma (mountain), Gatitũ (forest), Machangi (tree branches)
Others share the same names with insects:

Ngigĩ (locust), Ndono (grass hopper), Gathambo (black ants), Njũkĩ (bee).

The kinship between the *Agĩkũyũ* and the animals is not only expressed in sharing common names. It is also seen through manifestation of human spirits. Animals, reptiles and birds were essentially "people". Spirits of the dead relatives can possess animals and visit the living. Wild animals were thus respected especially if they came in proximate to human habitation. These animals were also the medium through which the *Agĩkũyũ* communicated and fed the spirits. In addition the *Agĩkũyũ* normally name their newborn babies after their living or dead parents. Two consequent deaths of a child named after an ancestor are endured. However, a child born in the third attempt is named after a wild animal. It is believed that the cruel spirit of death will not recognise the child and hence its survival. Moreover, a personal name may designate a character and hence the *Agĩkũyũ* use certain animals to describe certain human characters.

The hyena is characterised with greed and folly, the elephant with strength, the rabbit with ingenuity, the squirrel with hard work, the kite with swiftness and gorilla for dirt. These characteristics are articulated through proverbs, sayings and similes. The *Agĩkũyũ* also use proverbs to express beliefs, religious moral values**,** norms, and transmit tribal wisdom. Some of

these proverbs are drawn from animals. The following are a few examples:

Thegere igĩrĩ itiremagwo nĩ mwatũ

Two badgers are not overpowered by a beehive (Barra, 1990, p. 102)

Njogu ndĩremagwo nĩ mũguongo wayo

The elephant is not overpowered by its tusks (Barra, 1990, p. 91)

Mũhĩrĩga wa kĩmbu ndũthiragwo nĩ mũn'gũn'gũtũ

The marks of a chameleon are unique to the chameleon species

Thwariga yathũra mwanĩrĩri

An antelope detests anyone who screams at its presence

Mbogo nyingĩ itirĩ thathi

Many buffaloes have no meat (Barra, 1990, p. 48)

Hiti ndĩrĩaga mwana

A hyena does not devour its baby (Barra, 1990, p. 21)

Nũgũ ĩtaga ĩngĩĩ wamũtirĩ

A baboon laughs at another baboon‟s appearance

Nyoni yakaga nyũmba na mũthece ũmwe

The bird makes its nest only with one beak (Barra, 1990, p. 93)

Nyoni kĩrimũ yakaga irigũ ikũrũ ĩtoĩ rĩatemwo (Barra, 1990, p. 93) A foolish bird builds its nest on ripe banana

Nyeki ya nja ndĩrĩkaga

The grass of the court yard is not eaten (Barra, 1990, p. 92)

Ngware ndĩũragagĩrwo nja

The francolin is not killed in the court yard

Ngware ĩkĩrara mũtĩ igũrũ ndĩatigĩte thĩ kũri kwega

The francolin sleeps on a tree because it is not safe on the ground (Barra, 1990, p. 89)

Ngatia ciathiĩ hiti ciegangara

When lions have gone hyenas dance (Barra, 1990, p. 93)

As mentioned earlier, the kinship between the *Agĩkũyũ* and animals influences the way they treated animals. Despite accessibility of many wild animals, the *Agĩkũyũ* did not kill animals for food or fun (Hobley, 1910, p. 439, Crawshay, 1902, p. 37; Waithaka; 2012, p. 131). Routledge (1910, p. 82) writes, "Nothing but dire starvation will induce the Akikuyu to try to eat wild meat". A person who killed and ate a wild animal, a bird, a reptile, an insect, or a crab was rendered ceremonially unclean (*thahu*) (Routledge, 1910, p. 50). In addition, wild animals were not used for sacrifice to God (*Ngai*). At the same time, domestic animals were not slaughtered before they reached maturity. Moreover, a female goat or its kid was not slaughtered for food. The female was reserved for breeding (Routledge, 1910, p. 49). However boys before circumcision are allowed to trap and eat partridges (*ngware*), pigeons (*ndutura*), and hyraxes (*mĩkami*).

We have noted above that the *Agĩkũyũ* lived in harmony and respect with the wild animals in their environment. Their religious beliefs offered these animals protection. We also noted that the adults did not hunt wild animals and birds for food or pleasure (Hobley, 1906 p. 83). Furthermore, wild animals were not used for sacrifices to *Ngai* (God). According to Hobley, the nine *Agĩkũyũ* clans identified themselves with animal totems. He classified them as follows:

Aithekahuno- the stomach of a sheep; *Ethaga* – all wild game; *Anjirũ* – elephants and birds;

Aithirandũ – hippo; *Agachiko* – Zebra; *Agathiigia* – warthog; *Achera* - Thompson Gazelle; *Aithiegeni* – Impala ; *Ambũi* – fish

Hobley does not give details of the totems and their relationship with the environment.

However, borrowing from other cultures that much has been written on totem, totemic animals are not eaten (Mwaura, 2016, p. 130. This reinforces the claim made above that the *Agĩkũyũ* did not hunt wild animals for food.

Animals were also protected by taboos. A few examples will illustrate this. A hyena is basically a scavenger. However, it will prey on domestic animals like sheep and goats right into the residential hut. It was a taboo to kill such a hyena in the house. If such a taboo was broken, and a hyena was killed in a hut, the hut was abandoned and every member of the village purified (Hobley, p. 434). Conversely, as it is today among the pastoralists, domestic animals were grazed in the open field inhabited by wild animals. If a wild animal joins a flock it was not killed. Breaching this taboo would cost the owner a sheep whose intestines and bones were used to purify the herd least they die (Hobley, 1910, p. 436). Similarly, it was a taboo to kill an animal that took refuge at a homestead or at a sacred groove (Tate, 1910, p. 242). Furthermore, traditionally the *Agĩkũyũ* did not kill snakes. If a man killed a snake, he became ritually unclean and was to be purified. A snake that wandered into the homestead was served with milk and honey. The *Agĩkũyũ* believed that such snakes that visited human residence were seized by the spirits of the departed (*ngoma*) (Tate, 1910, p. 243).

Among the *Agĩkũyũ,* folklore are stories of wisdom and moral lessons. They are not fearful stories of animal-human conflict, carnivorous animals mercilessly tearing apart herbivorous animals or about hostility between human beings and animals. They are interesting tales about

physical appearances and characters of animals. Other folklores are about mythological giants (*marimũ*).

These dreaded human like cannibals lived in the forests in close proximity with human beings. They were however portrayed as human beings of low intelligence despite their large size. Forests were not destroyed to chase them away. They shared the same environment with the *Agĩkũyũ.* Some of these stories are instructions on how to treat animals. A story is for example told of a dove that gathered dry bones of a girl who had died. Fitting the bones back together the dove brought the girl back to life. The parents of the girl took her forcefully from the dove and declined to surrender her back to the dove. The parent‟s refusal to respect the wish of the dove resulted in a second death of the girl (Beecher, 1938, p. 85). In another story the ant was decorating himself for a dance. He fastened his waist with a belt in order to tie his sword. However he overdid it! He tied it so tight that he almost snapped his waste. Every ant has a very thin waste as a result of this careless act of the first ant. Some stories developed into proverbs that were used to teach moral lessons.

The *Agĩkũyũ* held beliefs on forests that helped them sustain the forest cover on the mountains. Some patches of forests were cleared to provide housing sites, communal meeting sites, fencing material and gardens for subsistence farming. Forests also provided hiding sites during time of war with other communities. They were also a pharmacy from which the medicine men drew herbs to treat diseases. This clearance was selective and was influenced by traditional religious beliefs. The *Agĩkũyũ* believed that trees possessed spirits capable of intervening in human affairs (Leakey, 1977, p. 1118). A tree spirit was not upset when its abode was cut, as long as it had another tree nearby to go to. When clearing land, people were supposed to leave "a large and

conspicuous tree" at intervals to absorb the spirits from trees cut down (Hobley, 1967, pp. 31-32). Such trees called *mĩrema kĩrĩti* ("one which resists the cutting of the forest") were not cut down.

If such a tree fell on its own, a cleansing ritual was performed to transfer the spirits to another tree. Angry spirits would kill a person who reportedly failed to perform this ritual within a short time span (Leakey, 1977, p. 1118). Such a tree was also not used for firewood. A person who used firewood from such a tree would become ill or die. However, senior male elders and very old women could use it without danger (Hobley, 1967, p. 32).

Sacred groves were also protected by super-natural sanctions. In the forests there were big sacred *mũgumo* trees. The area around these trees was considered a sacred grove. Cutting the tree, collecting firewood, breaking off branches within sacred groves was strictly forbidden. Until now, many *Agĩkũyũ* believe that evil shall befall any person who cuts down a *mũgumo* tree. The tree is perceived as a manifestation of *Ngai* (God). Under this tree sacrifices to *Ngai* are offered (Beecher, 1913, p. 4). All *mũgumo* trees are potentially sacred. However the bigger it is the most likely it will be used as a sanctuary. Besides the sacred *mũgumo* tree, on hill tops other giant forest trees like *mũtũngũrũ* were considered sacred. They were never cut down (Routledge, 1910, p. 38). Furthermore, the attribute of God as a protector was articulated in naming thick frightening forests as *mũtitũ wa Ngai ndeithia* (the forest of help me God).

The *Agĩkũyũ* country is composed of highlands. It is surrounded by four mountains: Mt. Kenya (*Kĩrĩnyaga*) to the North East, Aberdare range (*mũtambũrũko wa Nyandarua*) to the West, Ngong Hills (*Kĩrĩma kĩa-mbirũirũ*) to the South-West and Kilimambogo (*Kĩrĩma kĩa-Kĩanjahĩ*) to the South-East of the country. These mountains are religious monuments in the *Agĩkũyũ*

spirituality. The white-capped peak of Mount Kenya is the holiest. Sacrifices to *Ngai* were offered on this shrine. The lower slopes of these mountains were encircled by thick moist forests yielding to bushes and grassland. Numerous rivers and streams have their sources from these mountains.

Before the coming of Europeans, the peaks of these four mountains had never been trodden on by human beings. The community and the spirits of the ancestors kept strict vigilance against entering, cutting, breaking or interference of the environment.

The *Agĩkũyũ* were peasant farmers. They kept goats and sheep and to a small extent cows. The goats and sheep were used for food and animal sacrifices. Their land use mitigated the destruction of the forests and soil erosion. Before the British rule the *Agĩkũyũ* developed patterns of farming that was adapted to their subsistence farming. This type of farming had very little destructive effect on the land. Large plantations were unknown to the *Agĩkũyũ.* They farmed on small sections of land known as *thanju* (patches) leaving the other land fallow for grazing. These patches of land were usually 1 to 2 acres per household (Routledge, 1910, p. 38). In the midst of this cultivated land there were forests, sacred groves and burial sites (*kĩbĩrĩra*) preserved for the needs of the community. These community forests were under the stewardship of community elders (Routledge, 1910, p. 38). No individual was allowed by the community to destroy these forests. Land was owned by a clan (*mũhĩrĩga)*. It was then allotted to sub-clans (*mbarĩ*) and then families (*nyũmba*) and finally individuals. This allocation of ownership censored selfish individual land exploitation.

For centuries the *Agĩkũyũ* developed a planting system called *gĩthombochanio* (inter-cropping). In this system several plants were planted together. This provided vegetation cover that

prevented soil erosion. They also practiced crop rotation (*kũgarũrĩra irio*). In this system of farming land was left fallow for five to seven years before it was put into use again. In addition the *Agĩkũyũ* planted lines of vegetables at right angles to the slope (Mackenzie, 2000, p. 706).

This system of farming was environment-friendly and prevented the wearing away of the soil. The genesis of wanton destruction of the environment began when Kenya became a British territory in 1895. The Government introduced policies that destroyed the *Agĩkũyũ* spirituality in which the people lived in harmony with the environment. The Government alienated their land, set native reserves, cleared forests, and killed animals for fun. This destroyed land on which the *Agĩkũyũ* lived in harmony with their environment.

Western companies exploited natural forests by exporting timber to Europe. The Europeans saw the forests as unoccupied waste land. They saw no need to ask anyone for permission to exploit it. Moreover indigenous forests were being replaced with exotic trees from Europe. Mountains, rivers, plants and animals were given European names disregarding local names. According to Leakey in 1912 and the following years, the British Government had started alienating the *Agĩkũyũ* land for European settlement (Leakey, 1934, p. 76). This reduced the acreage of land set aside as a reserve for the *Agĩkũyũ.* This inevitably led to overpopulation and over grazing. The Government also introduced taxes and other western luxuries (Wolff, 1970, p. 276). Unavoidably, the *Agĩkũyũ* had to clear more land for farming in order to meet these new expenses. The Government also believed that the *Agĩkũyũ* were inferior and lacked religion and culture. They demonised the *Agĩkũyũ* belief in spirits (*ngoma*) who in the *Agĩkũyũ* worldview were the guards, and stewards of the forests (Cagnolo, 1933, p. 175).

We have noted above that there was a kinship between the *Agĩkũyũ* and the animals around them. This affinity was destroyed alongside the destruction of peasant farming (Wolff, 1975, p. 277).

According to Mwaura (2016, p. 132) the abundance of wildlife was one of the attractions of the British Government to Kenya.

On arrival, the Europeans hunted and killed wild animal for sport popularly referred to as the Big Game**.** The following examples fall short of giving a real picture. Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th president of the United States took a long safari holiday in Kenya in 1908. During his expedition he shot dead 500 wild animals (Gathungu, 2013, p. 103). Killing lions was counted as most prestigious. The success of a hunting expedition was determined by killing a lion. Churchill (1909, p. 24) captures the spirit of the Big Game: „How to find, and, having found, to kill, a lion is the unvarying theme of conversation; and every place and every journey is judged by a simple standard -"lions or no lions"". In the search of lions other animals were killed for fun and left dead to attract lions. Crawshay who visited Kenya in 1902 boasts "I shot one large hippopotamus bull, and could have shot fifty without putting myself to any great trouble to do so" (Crawshay, 1902, p. 45). By 1930 professional hunters were competing over control of hunting space (Gathungu, 2013, p. 110). This hunting also known as "big hunt" continued up to after independence (Mwaura, 2016, p.134). The Europeans further introduced new animals such as pigs, horses, rats and jiggers into the *Agĩkũyũ* environment.

The British Government also introduced new crops in the *Agĩkũyũ* environment (Wolff, 276). One such detrimental crop was the English potato to replace the African sweet potatoes.

According to Leakey sweet potatoes" vine were used to feed goats and sheep in the morning and in the evening to supplement grazing (Leakey, 1934, p.78). This was more prevalent in the dry seasons. In the long run, the *Agĩkũyũ* were planting less and less sweet potato and more English potatoes. This resulted in the sheep and goats overgrazing in the small patches of land left. In

addition the sweet potatoes were more nutritious than the English potatoes. In 1918 the Protectorate administration adopted a policy to replace millet with maize. Other European foods were introduced through Local Native Council.

According to Mackenzie, the primary aim of the Government was to take control of the *Agĩkũyũ* reserve (Mackenzie, 2000, p.701). This destroyed the *Agĩkũyũ* peasant agriculture (Wolff, 1975, p. 277).

Gĩthombochanio (crop rotation) and *Kũgarũrĩra irio* (inter-cropping) the *Agĩkũyũ* indigenous methods of farming were unacceptable to the Local Native Council. The *Agĩkũyũ* used these traditional methods of farming to keep the land fertile and to prevent soil erosion. Concerning these methods of farming Mackenzie (2000, p. 705) wrote, "Unless methods are entirely

changed, the great asset of this country, our land, will by degrees be ruined". The British officials believed that the *Agĩkũyũ* were inferior and lacked better methods of farming. As farmers the

Agĩkũyũ were described as 'parasites', 'mentally rigid' and 'inefficient. This method of farming was described as „haphazard" (Mackenzie, 2000, p. 705). According to Leakey, the Kenya Land Commission (KLC) which was formed in 1932 to look into the grievances and claims of cultural intrusion and alienation of the *Agĩkũyũ* to land for European settlement, depicted Africans as "reckless and uneducated with respect to land" (Mackenzie, 2000, p. 705).

The present wanton exploitation of natural resources was unknown, before the coming of the Europeans. Forest natural resources were used to build small huts, fuel, fencing and herbal medicine. They were also used for grazing pastures for domestic animals. Trees were also used to provide sanctuary, shade and windbreak. According to Mwaura one saw mill was introduced in Eastern Aberdares in 1902, and ten years later the number increased to ten. By 1906 a quarter

of forests had been cleared for white settlers (Holloway, 1965, p. 127). By 1908, it was estimated that over a quarter of a million acres of forest land had been alienated for settlers. Exploitation increased rapidly during the First World War and the number of sawmills in the forest rose from ten to twenty in 1912 (Holloway, 1965, p. 127).

Christianity is the largest religion in Kenya. The missionaries arrived before the British Government founded the East African Protectorate in 1895. Since the first CMS missionary Ludwig Krapf landed in Mombasa in 1844, the spread of Christianity in Kenya and among the *Agĩkũyũ* is a history of success. They championed education and health for the African besides preaching the good news. In their endeavour to evangelise the *Agĩkũyũ*, the missionaries also encouraged the destruction of the indigenous culture, religious beliefs, rites, and customs. When the *Agĩkũyũ* embraced Christianity their attitude towards their environment changed. The sacredness of the forests, animals and the land was lost. They joined hands with missionaries to destroy sacred sites and cut down sacred trees (Cagnolo, 1933; White, 1967). In this regard the *Agĩkũyũ* Christians participated in the destruction of the environment as the missionaries and the European settlers did. This destructive culture of the environment lingers on unabated to this day. Lynn White in a provocative controversial paper argued that ecology is determined by a people"s religion. He contended that the Judeo-Christian dominion belief sanctions human destruction of the environment (White, 1967, p. 1206). Dominion mandate is a doctrinal name used to refer to the biblical interpretation that humanity has been given a divine authority to rule over all creatures and the creation. The dominion mandate stems from (Gen 1:26-28).

> Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, [a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground." 27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 God blessed them and

> said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground. (Genesis 1:26-28)

These verses explain that man was made in the image of God and was given dominion over the creatures and was given the authority to subdue the earth. The Hebrew word used is *râdâh,* which means "rule", "dominate", "reign", "subjugate", "tread down", or "prevail" (Brown, Driver & Briggs 2008, p. 921). This verse has been interpreted by many to be a command given to Adam and all his descendants to have dominion and rule over all plants and animals. It is the misinterpretation of these verses that has led to the plunder of the environment. Tucker observes that contemporary Christian beliefs, policies, and practices are influenced by the way the Bible is read (Tucker, 1997, p. 3).

In this research the writer did not find an explicit reference to Genesis 1:26-28 justifying human destruction of the environment. However, these verses can also be interpreted as God‟s mandate to human being‟s stewardship to the environment. While the *Agĩkũyũ* may not have interpreted the scripture from the dominion perspective, embracing Christianity in the European container it came in, ended up destroying the indigenous heritage which included the religious beliefs and culture that had previously protected the environment.

Conclusion

This article has examined the relatedness between the *Agĩkũyũ* and their environment and how their culture and religious beliefs preserved the ecosystem before the British Government founded the East African Protectorate in 1895. They did not consider themselves superior to the environment. Animals, forests and rivers were protected through religious beliefs, taboos, community laws and human spirits. The environment was alive with relatedness. However, the arrival of the Europeans and the subsequent Protectorate Administration initiated unprecedented

destruction of the environment. New land tenure rules, annexing of land, introduction of new animals and plants, new industrial tools to exploit forest and false narratives on the environment were introduced (Wolff, 1975, p. 276). This destroyed the *Agĩkũyũ* kinship with the environment. In the two eras of British rule in Kenya, 1895-1920 as a Protectorate and 1920 -1963 as a Colony, seeds of Christianity were sawn. In spite of occasional conflicts, the Government provided protection and infrastructure for the missionaries to evangelise. Their labour bore fruits. The conversion to Christianity brought a change in the world view and lifestyle of *Agĩkũyũ.* They abandoned the traditional indigenous heritage of religious beliefs that preserved the environment. The main purpose of this paper was to draw attention to how religious beliefs have in the past preserved the environment. I conclude this paper with a critic of the *Agĩkũyũ* religious beliefs that preserved their environment for decades. These religious beliefs do not prescribe how to replenish a destroyed environment. Moreover, these religious beliefs were transmitted orally.

Today the majority of the *Agĩkũyũ* are literate yet these beliefs are not documented creeds. In addition, the beliefs are minimally lived and passed on today.

For more than one hundred years, drastic changes have taken place and inevitably affected the indigenous culture and the country. Land has been consolidated leading to individual ownership; the country is densely populated leading to pollution of rivers and the environment. People are more materialistic and have embraced a religion and western culture that is not sympathetic to the environment. In spite of this apparent challenge, Lynn White believes that the challenge to the current environmental degradation lies with religious beliefs. He writes: “More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one” (White, 1967, p. 1206).

Now that the majority of Kenyans are Christians, the hope of replenishing the environment lies in a critical re-examination of the biblical text Genesis 1:26-28 that has often been quoted to justify that human beings are superior to the environment. We all need humility to acknowledge that human beings, plants, animals and other elements of the environment are all God‟s creation. All environment including human beings is under God‟s intended plan.

References

Barra, G. (1990). *1,000 Agĩkũyũ Proverbs.* London: Mcmillan and Co. Ltd.

Barlow, A. R. (1908). The Mountain of Light. *Kikuyu News*, (19), 5-7.

Barlow, A. R. (1908). A Sacrifice for Rain. *Kikuyu News*, (3), 1-2.

Barlow, A. R. (1923) *Kikuyu: 1898-1923. Semi-Jubilee Book of the Church of Scotland Mission.* Edinburgh: William Blackwood.

Beech, M.W.H. (1913). The Sacred Fig Tree *Man* (3), 4-6.

Beech, M.W.H (1913). A Ceremony at a *Mũgumo* or Sacred Tree on the A-Kikuyu of East Africa" *Man* (51), 86-89.

Beecher M.W.H. (1913). The Sacred Fig-tree of the A-kikuyu of East Africa. *Man*, (3), 4-6.

Beecher, Leornard J. (1938). The stories of the Agĩkũyũ. *Africa*, (11), 80- 87.

Beecher, Leonard. (1964). Christian Terminology in the Vocabulary of an Animist Society. *BT, (*15), 117-127.

Bewes , T. F. C. (1953). Kikuyu Religion, Old and New. *African Affairs*, (52), 202-210. Brown,

F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. 2008. *The Brown- Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English*

Lexicon, 12th printing. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers.

Cagnolo, C. (1933). *The Akikuyu: Their Customs, Traditions and Folklore.* Nyeri: The Mission Printing School.

Castro , Alfonso Peter Indigenous Kikuyu Agroforestry: A Case Study of Kirinyaga, Kenya. *Human Ecology*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Mar., 1991), pp. 1-18

Churchill, Winston Spencer (1909). *My African Journey* Toronto: William Briggs.

Crawford, J.W.W. (1909). The Kikuyu Medicine –Man. *Man*, (30), 53-56.

Crawshay, Richard (1902). Kikuyu: Notes on the Country, People, Fauna, and Flora *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Jul., 1902), pp. 24-49.

Heritage in Kenya. In " Anne-Marie (Ed). *Wildlife heritage ownership and utilization in Kenya – the past, present and future"* UCL Press.

Holloway, C. W. (1965). Big Game in the Kenya Forests. *The Commonwealth Forestry Review*, (44), 125-139.

Hobley, C. W. (1910). British East Africa: Kikuyu Customs and Beliefs. *Thahu* and its Connection with Circumcision Rites. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, (40), 428-452.

Hobley, C.W. (1906) Kikuyu Medicines. *Man*, (6), 81-83.

Kenyatta, Jomo (1938). *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu.* London: Secker and Warbur.

Kenyatta, Jomo (1937). Kikuyu Religion, Ancestor-Worship and Sacrificial Practices. *Africa* (10), 308-328.

Langat, D and Cheboiwo . J. (2010). To Conserve or not to Conserve: A Case Study of Forest Valuation in Kenya. *Journal of Tropical Forest Science*, (22), 5-12.

Leakey, L. S. B. (1934). *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 33, 70-79.

Leakey, L.S. B. (1934). Some aspects of the Kikuyu Tribe. *Man*, (34), 59.

Leakey, S.L.B. (1977). *The Southern Kikuyu Before. Vol I, II, III,* London: Academic Press.

Leornard J. Beecher (1938).The stories of the *Agĩkũy. Africa* , (11), 80- 87.

McGlashan, Neil (1964). Indigenous Kikuyu Education. *African Affairs*, (63), 47-57.

Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *Introduction to African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.

Kabetu Mathew Njoroge. (1972). *Kĩrĩra Kĩa Ũgĩkũyũ (Customs and Traditions of the Agĩkũyũ People).* Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau.

Kenyatta, Jomo. (1937). Kikuyu Religion, ancestor –worship, and sacrificial Practices. *Africa,* (10), 308-328.

Mackenzie, A. Fiona D. (2000). Contested Ground: Colonial Narratives and the Kenyan Environment, 1920-1945. *Journal of Southern African Studies,* (26), 697-718.

Mackinder, Halford (1930). "Mount Kenya in 1899" *The Geographical Journal*, 76, 529-534.

Mbiti, S. John (1984). *African Religions and Philosophy.* Nairobi: Heinemann.

Miller, C. (1971). *The Lunatic Express*. London: Penguin.

Mwaura, Francis (2016). Wildlife heritage ownership and utilization in Kenya – the past, present and future. In Deisser, Mugwima Njuguna (Eds). *Conservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage in Kenya.* UCL Press.

Republic of Kenya. Ministry of Environment, Water and Natural Resources**.** National Environment Policy, 2013.

Routledge, W. Scoresby, and Routledge Katherine (1910) With *a Prehistoric People: The Akikuyu of British East Africa.* London: Edward Arnold.

Roosevelt, Theodore (1910). *African Game Trails, an Account of the African Wanderings of an American Hunter-naturalist*. New York: Scribner.

Tate, H. R. (1904). Notes on the Kikuyu and Kamba Tribes of British East Africa. *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, (34), 130-148.

Tate, H. R. (1910). The Native Law of the Southern Gikuyu of British East Africa. *Journal of the Royal African Society*, (9), 233-254.

Tucker, Gene M. (1997). Rain on a Land Where no one Lives: the Hebrew Bible on the Environment. *Journal of Biblical Literature* (116), 3-17.

Waithaka, John, (2012). Historical Factors that Shaped Wildlife Conservation in Kenya. *The GWS Journal of Parks, Protected Areas & Cultural Sites,* (29), 21-29.

Wamue, Grace Nyatugah. (2001). Revisiting Our Indigenous Shrines through Mungiki. *African Affairs*, (100), 453-467.

White, L. (1967).The historical roots of our ecologic crisis. *Science,* (155), 1203–1207.

Wolff, Richard D, (1970). Economic Aspects of British Colonialism in Kenya, 1895 to 1930. *The Journal of Economic History*, (30), pp. 273-277

Wolff, Richard D. "Economic Aspects of British Colonialism in Kenya, 1895 to 1930" *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 30, No. 1, (Mar., 1970), pp. 273-277