

Influence of Participation in the Kiama-Kia-Ma Goat Sacrifice on the Spiritual Beliefs, Values, and Practices of Agikuyu Christian Men

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of the 'Kiama-kia-ma' goat sacrifice ritual on the spirituality of Agikuyu Christian men in the African Christian Church, Kigumo Sub-County, Kenya. The research specifically analyzed how participation in this traditional rite of passage into eldership shapes spiritual beliefs, values, and practices. A mixed-methods approach was employed, utilizing questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions with a sample of 210 men. The findings reveal that participation induces significant spiritual conflict and a state of dual allegiance between Christian faith and traditional beliefs. While 97% of respondents intellectually affirmed the superiority of Jesus Christ's blood, practical syncretism was prevalent, with many attributing parallel, culturally-specific power to the goat sacrifice for socio-cultural legitimacy. This duality had a tangible negative impact on Christian disciplines, manifesting in a marked decline in prayer frequency (reported by 65% of participants) and reduced church attendance. The ritual created a barrier to sacramental participation, notably Holy Communion, due to feelings of guilt and incompatibility. The study concludes that the *Kiama-kia-ma* goat sacrifice significantly undermines the exclusivity of Christian commitment and disrupts spiritual practices among Agikuyu men. It underscores an urgent need for the church to develop deeper, contextually-sensitive discipleship and inculturation strategies that address the core cultural needs for identity and belonging, thereby affirming Christ's supremacy over all domains of life.

Keywords: *Kiama-Kia-Ma, Goat Sacrifice, Spiritual Beliefs, Values, and Practices, Agikuyu Christian Men*

INTRODUCTION

Across Africa, the encounter between Christianity and traditional belief systems has created a complex religious landscape characterized by syncretism and dual allegiance. Despite the widespread adoption of Christianity, many African Christians continue to observe indigenous practices, such as sacrifices and libations, which were central to their cultural and spiritual identity long before the arrival of missionaries. This duality presents a significant theological and pastoral challenge, as it blurs the boundaries between Christian faith and ancestral religious observances.

Among the Agikuyu community of Kenya, one of the most enduring traditional institutions is the *Kiama-kia-ma*, a council of elders that performs goat sacrifices as a rite of passage into eldership. The goat sacrifice, known as *mburi ya kiama*, is a profound cultural symbol of purification, social covenant, and acceptance within the community. Historically, this ritual fostered unity, peace, and moral guidance. However, in a contemporary Christian context, its revival creates a spiritual conflict, particularly because it involves the invocation of ancestral

spirits and blood sacrifices that stand in direct contrast to the biblical teaching of the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice (Hebrews 9:12).

In Kigumo Sub-County, Murang'a County a region deeply rooted in Gikuyu traditions this tension is visibly manifested. Local churches within the African Christian Church have observed that many of their male congregants, including those in leadership positions, actively participate in *Kiama-kia-ma* ceremonies. This phenomenon raises critical questions about the influence of this traditional ritual on the spirituality of Agikuyu Christian men. It prompts an investigation into how participation in the goat sacrifice affects their faith commitment, moral consistency, and overall spiritual growth as Christians.

LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL REVIEW

The objective of this study was to analyze how participation in the *Kiama-kia-ma* goat sacrifice influences the spiritual beliefs, values, and practices of Agikuyu Christian men. A review of existing literature provides a foundation for understanding this complex interaction. Francis Omondi (2023) contextualizes the *Kiama-kia-ma* as the highest authority among the Agikuyu, vested with legislative, executive, and judicial functions. He traces its origins to a patriarchal shift in governance, where men began meeting in forests, carrying a goat for sustenance during discussions, thus originating the term *mburi ya kiama*. This historical perspective is crucial as it underscores the council's deep-seated role in social organization. However, Turner (1968) points to a critical area of conflict by noting that the *Kiama's* activities are imbued with crucial religious values, essentially making them acts of worship. For Christian men, this creates a fundamental dilemma: their faith calls them to worship God "in spirit and in truth," while the council's rituals often involve venerating ancestral spirits and Agikuyu deities.

The literature suggests that the ritual's influence on spirituality is multifaceted. The act of vow-taking upon joining the council, often sworn in the name of Gikuyu and Mumbi, directly contests the Christian confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, practices such as praying while facing Mount Kenya (Kere-Nyaga) and adhering to a set of commandments derived from Agikuyu traditional religion rather than the Bible, foster a spiritual framework that competes with Christian discipleship. This duality can lead to a fragmented spiritual identity, where a man's allegiance is divided between the church and the council, potentially diluting his commitment to Christian doctrines and practices.

Ndungu (2022) observes a modern commercialization of the ritual, where the initiation goat can be substituted with a cash payment. This shift does not necessarily diminish its spiritual significance for participants but indicates the evolving nature of the tradition and its persistent appeal. The council's strong emphasis on tribal unity, while culturally cohesive, can also be spiritually divisive within the universal body of Christ, which promotes unity beyond ethnic lines.

To analyze this interplay between culture and faith, this study is anchored in the Theory of Inculturation. This theory provides a framework for understanding the dynamic process of integrating the Christian message within a specific cultural context. Pope John Paul II defined inculturation as "the process of bringing Christ into the very centre of African life and lifting all African life to Christ." It is not about the superficial replacement of cultural symbols but a profound transformation where the gospel redeems and elevates cultural values.

Schineller (1990) describes it as the incarnation of the Christian life and message in a particular cultural context, mirroring the Word becoming flesh. In this study, the theory of inculturation is employed to critically examine whether the values embedded in the goat sacrifice such as community, transition, and covenant can be transformed and fulfilled through the Christian narrative of Christ's ultimate sacrifice. The central question becomes whether the blood of Jesus can be understood and accepted within the Agikuyu worldview as the superior and final atonement, thereby resolving the spiritual conflict faced by Christian

men and affirming a mature Christian eldership based on faith in Christ alone. This theoretical lens is essential for moving beyond mere condemnation of the practice and towards a constructive, biblically-grounded pastoral response.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Methodology

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was adopted. This approach involved the simultaneous collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, analyzing them separately, and then merging the results to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The quantitative component provided broad, generalizable data on the extent and nature of the influence, while the qualitative component offered rich, narrative depth to explain the "how" and "why" behind the numbers.

Population and Sampling

The target population was exclusively Agikuyu Christian men who were members of the African Christian Church in Kigumo Sub-County. A combination of sampling techniques was used:

Stratified Random Sampling: The 10 representative parishes in Kigumo Sub-County served as strata to ensure geographical spread.

Purposive Sampling: Within these strata, the researcher deliberately sought out men who were known or self-identified as having participated in the *Kiama-kia-ma* goat sacrifice. This was crucial to ensure the study captured the experiences of the relevant group.

A sub-sample of 210 men was drawn from the larger study, with a deliberate focus on including a significant proportion of *Kiama-kia-ma* participants to adequately address the research objective.

Data Collection Instruments

Three primary instruments were tailored to collect data. A structured questionnaire included close-ended questions using a Likert scale (e.g., Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) to quantitatively gauge; the frequency of participation in *Kiama-kia-ma* rituals.

Changes in church attendance, prayer frequency, and Bible study habits after joining the council, the level of agreement with statements about spiritual conflict (e.g., "I feel torn between my faith in Jesus and my duties to the *Kiama*") and perceptions on the superiority of Christ's blood versus the goat's blood.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a select group of 15-20 men who had participated in the ritual. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, qualitative data.

Separate FGDs were held with two groups: Group A: Christian men who are *Kiama-kia-ma* members. Group B: Christian men who have resisted joining the council.

This comparative approach allowed for a dynamic discussion on the perceived spiritual influences, exploring themes of identity, belonging, guilt, and faith.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis was conducted in two parallel streams:

Quantitative Data Analysis:

Data from the questionnaires were cleaned, coded, and entered into a statistical software package (e.g., SPSS or Excel).

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were generated to summarize the data and describe the sample's characteristics and response patterns.

Cross-tabulations were used to explore relationships between variables, for instance, comparing the frequency of prayer with the length of membership in the *Kiama*.

Qualitative Data Analysis:

Interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated where

necessary.

Thematic analysis was employed. This involved:

Familiarization: Repeated reading of transcripts to gain a deep understanding.

Coding: Generating initial codes from the data that captured key concepts.

Theme Development: Collating codes into potential themes that directly addressed the influence on spirituality (e.g., "Theme: Spiritual Dissonance and Dual Allegiance," "Theme: Reinterpretation of Christian Faith through Cultural Lens").

Reviewing and Defining Themes: Refining themes to ensure they accurately represented the data set.

The final step was to merge the quantitative and qualitative findings. For example, a quantitative finding that "70% of participants reported a decrease in church attendance" was explained and given context by the qualitative themes, such as quotes describing feelings of hypocrisy or alienation from the church community after joining the *Kiama*. This integration provided a robust and nuanced analysis of how the goat sacrifice influences spirituality.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were made aware that they could withdraw at any time. Given the sensitive nature of discussing spiritual conflict and secretive cultural practices, the researcher ensured a non-judgmental stance to foster an environment of trust and honest disclosure.

RESULTS

Profile of Participation and Spiritual Dissonance

A foundational finding was the direct correlation between *Kiama-kia-ma* membership and experiences of spiritual conflict. As shown in Table 1, while the majority of respondents were not members, a significant minority (15%) were, providing a critical cohort for analysis.

Table 1: Membership Status of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Members of Kiama-kia-ma	31	15%
Non-Members	179	85%
Total	210	100%

Data from in-depth interviews with these 31 members revealed a near-universal theme of spiritual dissonance. One respondent articulated a common sentiment: *"You feel like you are serving two masters. At church, you are told your salvation is in Christ alone. In the Kiama, you are told you must offer the goat to be a true elder and be accepted by the ancestors. The heart is torn."* This duality manifested in measurable changes in spiritual practices.

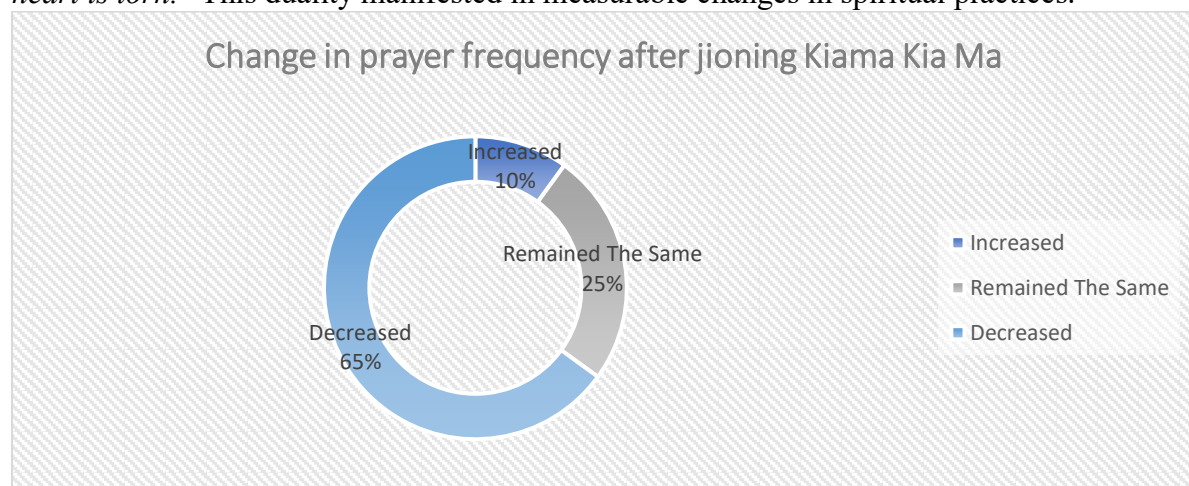


Figure 1: Reported Change in Prayer Frequency After Joining Kiama-kia-ma

As Figure 1 illustrates, 65% of members reported a decrease in the frequency of personal

prayer. Qualitative data clarified that this was not merely a time allocation issue but one of spiritual confusion and guilt. Participants expressed uncertainty about "who to pray to" or felt their prayers were "hypocritical" after participating in rituals invoking ancestral spirits.

Influence on Core Spiritual Beliefs and Values

The study sought to understand if participation in the ritual altered core Christian doctrines in the minds of the believers. When all 210 respondents were asked a foundational theological question, the results were telling.

Table 2: Belief in the Superiority of Christ's Blood

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, it is superior	203	97%
No, it is not superior	7	3%
Total	210	100%

While Table 2 shows an overwhelming intellectual assent to the superiority of Christ's blood (97%), the qualitative data from *Kiama* members revealed a more nuanced, syncretic belief system. For many, the goat sacrifice was not seen as a replacement for Christ's atonement but as a parallel requirement for *cultural and social* legitimacy. One focus group participant explained, "*The blood of Jesus saves my soul for heaven. The blood of the goat cleanses me to be an elder in my community and unites me with my fathers. They do different things.*" This represents a significant shift in values, where socio-cultural identity begins to hold a spiritual authority that operates alongside, and sometimes in tension with, Christian faith.

Furthermore, the ritual of vow-taking in the name of Gikuyu and Mumbi was frequently cited as a point of conflict with the Christian value of exclusive allegiance to God. This created a state of "dual allegiance" that fundamentally influenced their spiritual identity.

Impact on Religious Practices and Church Participation

The influence extended beyond personal beliefs into observable religious practices. A cross-analysis of *Kiama* members' church participation patterns revealed a significant trend.

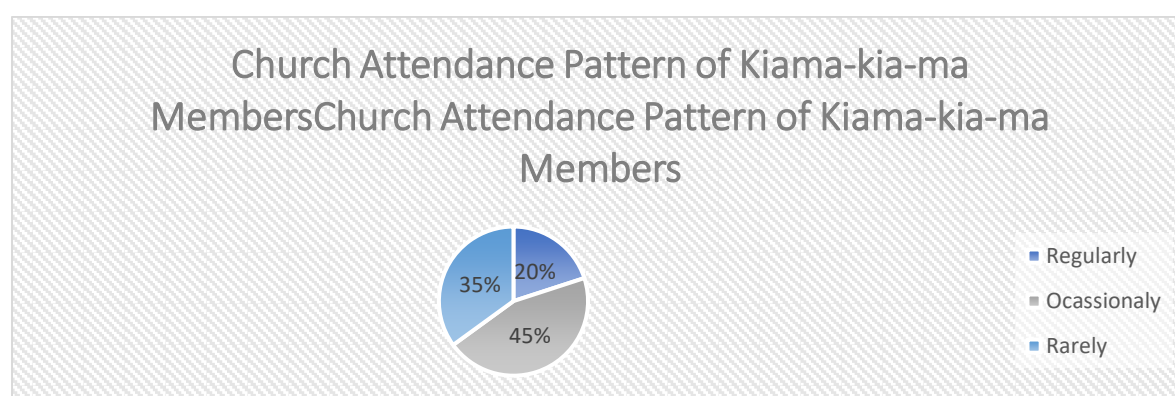


Figure 2: Church Attendance Pattern of Kiama-kia-ma Members

As shown in Figure 2, only 20% of *Kiama* members maintained regular church attendance. The majority (80%) attended only occasionally or rarely. The qualitative data provided context: many members reported feeling judged by church leadership and fellow congregants, leading to withdrawal. Others admitted to a conscious or subconscious distancing, feeling that their involvement in the *Kiama* made them "less of a Christian" in the church environment.

The celebration of Holy Communion became a particularly poignant point of conflict. Several interviewees expressed hesitancy in partaking, with one stating, "*How can I take the holy body of Christ when just a week ago I was swearing an oath with the blood of a goat to the spirits of the land? I sometimes sit in the pew when others go forward.*" This demonstrates how the traditional practice directly inhibits a central Christian sacrament, creating a tangible barrier to full participation in the life of the church.

DISCUSSION

The pervasive sense of spiritual dissonance and "torn" allegiance reported by participants is a central finding. This aligns with Turner's (1968) assertion that the *Kiama's* activities are not merely social but are imbued with "crucial social and religious values." When men participate in rituals that involve vows to Gikuyu and Mumbi and the invocation of ancestral spirits, they are engaging in a system of worship that stands in direct competition with the biblical call for exclusive devotion to God through Jesus Christ. This creates what the study identified as a "dual allegiance."

This finding directly addresses the pastoral concern raised in the problem statement: that dual participation "undermines Christian discipleship." The data confirms this, showing that this conflict is not abstract but has practical consequences, most evidently in the significant decline in prayer frequency (65% of members). This suggests that the spiritual energy and certainty required for a consistent prayer life are fractured by the competing demands of two spiritually demanding worlds.

A critical insight from this study is the nuanced nature of the syncretism observed. The near-unanimous intellectual assent to the superiority of Christ's blood (97%) indicates that the Christian message has been effectively received at a doctrinal level. However, the simultaneous participation in the goat sacrifice reveals that this doctrine has not fully displaced the deep-seated cultural worldview.

Participants did not typically describe the goat's blood as *replacing* Christ's sacrifice for salvation; rather, they assigned it a parallel function for *socio-cultural* legitimacy and earthly belonging. This finding resonates with John S. Mbiti's (1969) observation that "Africans are notoriously religious" and that traditional religion permeates all of life, making a formal distinction between sacred and secular difficult. For these men, the goat sacrifice operates in the "secular" sphere of cultural identity and community standing—a sphere which, in the Agikuyu worldview, is inherently religious. This is not a rejection of Christ but a failure to see His supremacy over all domains of life, a key marker of spiritual maturity.

This pragmatic syncretism can be interpreted as a response to cognitive dissonance. Faced with the pressure to conform to a powerful cultural institution, men develop a bifurcated belief system that allows them to maintain their Christian identity while also securing their place within their ethnic community. This aligns with Stewart and Shaw's (2005) view that what scholars often label syncretism is often a lived strategy for navigating complex cultural and religious landscapes.

The decline in church attendance and the hesitation to partake in Holy Communion are symptomatic of the deeper spiritual conflict. These are not merely changes in habit but are significant indicators of a fractured relationship with the body of Christ. The feeling of being judged by the church community, as reported in the interviews, creates a feedback loop of alienation, pushing men further from the very institution that could provide spiritual guidance and grounding.

This finding underscores a failure in the inculturation process. As defined by Pope John Paul II, genuine inculturation involves a "mutual symbiosis" where the gospel transforms culture. The current situation reveals a different dynamic: the cultural practice is transforming the expression of Christian faith, and not in a way that affirms Christ's lordship. The church's response, as perceived by these men, has been one of rejection or rule-making rather than a transformative theological engagement that addresses the core human needs for identity, belonging, and rites of passage that the *Kiama* provides.

The results demonstrate a clear need for a more robust application of inculturation theology. The theory, as outlined by Schineller (1990), calls for the "incarnation of the Christian life and message in a particular context." The current conflict shows that the gospel has been *planted* in Agikuyu culture but has not fully *incarnated* within it in a way that redeems

concepts of eldership, community, and covenant.

The challenge, as highlighted by Elizabeth Ezenweke & Ikechukwu Kanu, is to guide inculturation away from "crude syncretism." The data suggests that without such guided engagement, syncretism becomes the default path for lay believers. A successful inculturation process would not simply condemn the goat sacrifice but would seek to understand the deep yearnings it fulfills—for identity, transition, and communal acceptance—and present the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of those yearnings, thereby affirming His superiority not just in a distant heaven but in the concrete social reality of Kigumo Sub-County.

In conclusion, the influence of the *Kiama-kia-ma* goat sacrifice on Agikuyu Christian men is significant and predominantly negative, leading to a fragmented spirituality that intellectually acknowledges Christ but practically shares allegiance with traditional powers. This underscores an urgent need for the church to move beyond condemnation to a strategic, empathetic, and theologically deep ministry of inculturation that addresses the root of the attraction to the *Kiama* and presents Christ as the all-sufficient Lord over both soul and culture.

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