

# SOURCES OF AUTHORITY AND INFLUENCE OF COUNCILS OF ELDERS IN KENYA WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO *NJURI NCHEKE* OF MERU COUNTY, KENYA

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## ABSTRACT

Many communities in Kenya have recently witnessed a cultural and religious revival, and they are employing all possible means to propagate this revival. In some communities, there is a revival of ethnic rites, religious rituals and customs. Nationally, there are efforts to preserve and promote ethnic cultures. On the fore front of the revival of cultural consciousness are Councils of elders. Such councils are treated with respect, honour and reverence as the custodians of these cultures and religious beliefs. An example of a council of elders is the *Njuri Ncheke* of the Ameru. Generally, there is a resilience of African traditional religion in Kenya as exemplified by the *Njuri Ncheke*. The *Njuri Ncheke* council of elders has been resilient in the face of modernization, and in the context of a dynamic society with a modern judicial system, new constitutional laws and new religious structures. In spite of this apparent resilience of *Njuri Ncheke* in Meru County, there has not been any systematic investigation to unearth the phenomenon. The broad objective of this study, therefore, was to investigate the contributions of councils of elders to the resilience of African traditional religion and in particular, the *Njuri Ncheke* of Meru County. The study was informed by functionalism theory of religion as understood by Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. This was a qualitative study that sought to describe and analyse the resilience of African traditional religion in Kenya with *Njuri Ncheke* as a case. The findings of the study are significant in making an important contribution to better understanding of councils of elders in Kenya, understanding the role of religious and indigenous institutions in devolved system of governance, the basis of their influence and authority and their rightful place in a modern dynamic society.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Councils, *Njuri Ncheke*, African Traditional Religion (ATR), Sacredness, Dysfunctional.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a study on the contributions of councils of elders to the resilience of African Traditional Religion with particular reference to *Njuri Ncheke* of Meru County. The research was prompted by apparent resurgence of *Njuri Ncheke* in Meru County with its wealth of influence and authority in the context of a dynamic society, resisting the waves of modernization. This trend has led to a resurgence of the religious roles, activities and practices of *Njuri Ncheke* in Meru County hence making the council a formidable authoritative institution as it was in the past. The case of *Njuri Ncheke* was relevant to the study because there is no other council of elders in Kenya whose influence is widely seen as *Njuri Ncheke*. The council is an institution founded on religious values and roles and since this study falls under religious studies discipline, it was necessary to investigate the functions of the council in order to probe the effectiveness of religion in preserving institutions. The choice of Christianity versus *Njuri Ncheke* was influenced by information gathered from a preliminary visit to the area of study, that almost all *Njuri Ncheke* elders are affiliated to Christianity. The choice of Meru County as the area of study, though wide in scope, was informed by the realization that the council is one but with elders

representing each sub-county. Existing literature on *Njuri Ncheke* has largely been considered from the historical perspective and not from the religious or social point of view. This is probably because their presence is assumed to be historical and their activities viewed as just normal duties performed by elders. Thus, this study intended to do an in-depth investigation of the resilience of their roles, practices and activities so as to help shed light on the importance of councils of elders in modern society. The close relationship between the state and the council of elders in Kenya has been seen openly on many occasions. This is not only seen during election campaigns and when settling border disputes but also on relevant matters affecting the country. The researcher's awareness of such renewed involvement of the council in current affairs motivated the study.

The value of this study to modern society was also a motivating factor. The findings will provide the basis of making recommendations and suggesting a longer term policy by the government to incorporate the roles of councils of elders in the country's constitution. Considering the high rate of insecurity and border disputes in the country, their role in arbitrating and reconciling warring communities come in as a boost to

the modern legal systems. Furthermore, an in-depth knowledge of their activities and irreplaceable functions will lead to recognition and appreciation of councils of elders in Kenya. The findings will help *Njuri Ncheke* leadership to re-evaluate the relevance and effectiveness of some of their roles and activities in relation to modern dynamism.

### Theory

This study was informed by the social functionalism theory as understood by Durkheim (1915), Parsons (1951) and Merton (1968). The essence of this theory is that social institutions remain relevant to the society as long as they serve useful purposes such as maintenance and perpetuation of the social system. Those that no longer serve any purpose are discarded as dysfunctional. With regard to this paper, the argument is that the contributions of *Njuri Ncheke* council of elders to the resilience of African Traditional religion, and their authority and influence in Meru County has been conditioned by the functional significance of the council's roles, practices and activities in the County.

### Methodology

The discussions in this article are based on a field study in which 200 respondents were purposively selected. These were mainly *Njuri Ncheke* elders, the clergy and ordinary community members. Account was taken of their age, religious faith, level of formal education and length of time in the council (for elders). Data for analysis and discussion was collected using semi structured questions and structured interviews. The main limitations were the distance between Egerton University and Meru County and the limited financial resources. However, these did not in any way compromise the credibility of the findings.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been several studies with regard to councils of elders in Africa and more especially, *Njuri Ncheke* of the Ameru. Bernadi (1959), has studied the Ameru traditional leadership with *mugwe* (Prophet) at the top. The author links *mugwe* with *Njuri Ncheke*, the traditional council of elders and says that the prophet blesses all ceremonies of the council. Bernadi also notes that as society erodes societal values in Kenya, with formal education and the media weakening the values held dear by its more than forty tribes, the Ameru traditional leadership under *Njuri Ncheke* remains strong and could be part of the country's answer to rising moral decadence. His observation informed this paper.

Mutungi (1977), observes that traditional beliefs and institutions are part and parcel of African culture and

he goes on to say that it would be a pity if simply because one learns how to read and write, one abandoned his or her cultural heritage. Mutungi says that no religion or system of education can easily convert a people from their culture and way of life. The author notes that there are deep-rooted reasons underlying the persistence of traditional beliefs and social institutions. As observed in many parts of Kenya today, current trend seems to be pushing not only for the official recognition of the role and place of traditional councils of elders like *Njuri Ncheke*, but also for incorporation in all aspects of life. Mutungi's arguments formed a strong base for this paper.

Mugambi (1979) notes that cherished customs and beliefs are part of our African heritage, a rich heritage which we should study if we want to understand the past and how it will affect life today. The author says that African traditional cultures, social institutions, lifestyles and attitudes towards life were essentially religious and were believed to have come from God and as such cannot be dismissed. Mugambi examines the role of human spirits and the living dead as the forebearers of the community. The author observes that they upheld communal unity and cooperation just as God and the divinities sustained all social institutions. In this sense, Senghor (1950) is correct in calling the African community collective, for it went beyond the limits of the visible members of the community to include the ancestors and the living dead.

Bahemuka (1983), describes Christianity as having come to Africa with its rituals, its standards and values. According to Bahemuka, African societies too had their value systems which were central to the teachings of the society. The author says that although the Africans accepted Christianity, they retained their personality and at moments of crisis, they lean back to where their roots are. The author further argues that the type of Christianity that is emerging in Africa is enriched by the traditions that are to be found on the continent. Bahemuka observes that the African person is caught in a wave of change that has far reaching social, economic and political implications. The author argues that at the level of society, the communities are experiencing great difficulties in choosing what to adopt and what to reject. Bahemuka says that while the African is trying in a dynamic society to conquer the environment, but above all, he is moulded and enriched by his past. It is this past that is so present in the leadership of *Njuri Ncheke* and it has greatly contributed to the resilience of their roles, practices and activities in Meru County.

Jeffrey (1993), has studied the history of the Ameru, and says that *Njuri Ncheke* was formed out of the need

to form contacts between the elders' councils. The author notes that in the course of the Ameru migration to their present homeland, interclan and individual conflicts had been settled simply by calling spokesmen from each faction into council on a temporary basis. But as topography scattered the clans, Jeffrey says that the spokesmen of spokesmen concept took a more permanent form. Beginning in Tigania after the 1740's, then spreading North to Igembe and more slowly thereafter into the Southern regions, leading members of every elder's council withdrew from the gatherings of few elders to form more exclusive associations of their own. In Tigania and later in adjoining regions, these more exclusive units came to be called 'Njuri' (council of the few). According to Jeffrey, their initial purpose was also to act as living repositories for the 'secret' now required for their community to survive. Dissemination of such knowledge which was always protected by an oath meant death.

Peatrik (2005), traces the origin of the rise to power of *Njuri Ncheke*. The author notes that the popularity and influence of the council had much to do with H.E. Lambert, District Commissioner of Meru in 1934-1935 and 1939-1942. The author argues that the commissioner gave this secretive and exclusive association more prominence than it perhaps originally had by regarding it as the 'council of elders', and insisting that all Meru men who wanted to be appointed at any level of the local administration had to belong to the *Njuri Ncheke*, thus increasing initiation. *Njuri* elders became the new local rulers, and through them Lambert operated a kind of indirect rule in Meru district. To date, any Meru man aspiring for any position of leadership must first be a man of *Njuri* and this has greatly contributed to the popularity of *Njuri Ncheke* in Meru County.

Onyancha (2010), highlights some of the irreplaceable roles of elders in Kisii community. The author argues that if a particular malevolent behaviour stirred the fury of the community and the culprit remained hidden, the elders summoned an open meeting in which a ritual called *ogotureka chinkore* (turning drinking straws upside down) was performed. The attendant elders held their straws upside down. The eldest elder present uttered certain words of the curse wishing the culprit ill-luck, including death. According to Onyancha, a curse of this kind was not something to be easily dismissed by anybody. The present study was interested in investigating such irreplaceable functions performed by *Njuri Ncheke* that have made the council revive its roles and remain relevant in the context of modern dynamism.

A study by Orina and Onyancha (2013), mainly addressed the issue of integration of African religion and culture in Christian worship in the Methodist Church of Kenya in Meru County. The study found membership to *Njuri Ncheke* fashionable even among the Christian converts despite the fact that Methodist Church doctrines do not allow baptized church members to join the council in any capacity. The study revealed a show of unity between the Church and *Njuri Ncheke* elders when handling issues affecting the Meru community. Orina and Onyancha regarded this kind of unity as a case of syncretism where beliefs and practices of two religions are being articulated. This is because *Njuri Ncheke* elders are the custodians of ATR while the Church is the propagator of Christianity. However the study did not address the issue of resilience of *Njuri Ncheke* as a traditional religious institution, their persisting role and influence in Meru.

## FINDINGS

### Historical Source of Authority and Influence

Many respondents, both men and women were in agreement that *Njuri Ncheke* authority and influence is historical but has grown remarkably in recent years. The patriarchs, Koomenjue and Kauro-o-Bechau endowed *Njuri Ncheke* with the power and responsibility to be in charge of the community as the custodians of the Ameru religious beliefs and customs. Kauro-o-Bechau's words '*Njuri ikaura*' are a clear indication that *Njuri Ncheke*, as the sole mandated institution in the Meru community is expected to continue discharging its duties authoritatively as long as the gods of the land and the ancestral spirits have not spoken otherwise. Although there were two other institutions (*Kiruka* and *Ntiba*) that in the past influenced community decisions especially in matters of war, these institutions were never mandated by the patriarchs. Conclusively then, it is suffice to say that *Njuri Ncheke* authority and influence is from the patriarchs of the community and the obligation to obey the same has greatly contributed to their resilience, authority and influence.

Stories from elders concerning the historical source of *Njuri* authority and influence seemed to agree with Peatrik (1999). The author says that the actual rise to power of *Njuri Ncheke* had to do with H.E. Lambert, District Commissioner of Meru in 1934-1935 and 1939-1942. Peatrik argues that Lambert gave the religious institution more prominence than it perhaps originally had by regarding it as "The council of elders". The District Commissioner also insisted that all elders who wanted to be appointed at any level of the local administration had to belong to *Njuri Ncheke*, thus increasing initiation into the council. *Njuri Ncheke* elders became the new local rulers and through them,

Lambert operated a kind of indirect rule in Meru District. But the increasing permanent nature of *Njuri Ncheke* was facilitated by steady expansion in the number of livestock available to Tigania and Igembe sub-tribes. This made *Njuri Ncheke* to be associated with Tigania and Igembe for several years. But following Lambert's declaration, men from other sub-tribes started joining the council so as to be appointed into administrative posts in the colonial government. The seemingly close relationship between *Njuri Ncheke* and the colonial government also made the council more attractive as they were consulted on all matters affecting the Meru community. The respect accorded to *Njuri Ncheke* by the colonial government continued even after Kenya's independence and this automatically made the religious institution authoritative and influential and their decision is always believed to be final. The current increase in membership has boosted their influence and popularity as every well to do Meru man is seeking association with the council.

Another likely and less known historical source of *Njuri Ncheke* authority and influence is the patriarchal system. This factor has also contributed to the male domination in the institution. It was common knowledge among the respondents, and with a greater emphasis from *Njuri Ncheke* elders that in Meru community, the descent is patriarchal and the community neither knew, nor recognized matriarchal lineage. This is because their God, *Murungu*, from whom they all descend is believed to be male. The patriarchs, Koomenjue and Kauro-o-Bechau are also male. It therefore follows automatically that the male possesses authority and influence and this explains the male dominance and authority of the institution.

#### **Dysfunctional Nature of Christianity in Meru**

Respondents thought unanimously that the failure of Christianity is to blame for the rise to power and current resilience of *Njuri Ncheke*. Their sentiments agree with Rhodes (2001), who, while discussing the causes of cults in the U.S, blames the church for, among other things, its failure to make a real moral difference in the lives of its members. Its failure to make a sense of belonging among its members, failure to meet people's deepest needs and failure to make church doctrines a high priority such that many Christians do not know exactly what is expected of them. Rhodes sentiments apply to the church in Meru County in relation to the supremacy of *Njuri Ncheke*. The church in Meru County lacks a clear stand on matters to do with morality and punishment of law breakers therefore *Njuri Ncheke* supersedes the church on matters of morality and discipline. Owing to the mushrooming of Pentecostal churches in the County,

wrong doers have a leeway to move from one church to another and easily get off. In explaining the emergence of African independent churches, Mbiti (1969) argued that missionary Christianity failed to penetrate sufficiently deep into African religiosity and this was and remains exactly the case in Meru County, a factor that has given *Njuri Ncheke* precedence.

The moral standard of the Meru people was very high before the coming of Christianity. Nevertheless, the traditional moral system of countering crimes was broken down since it was not in line with the teachings of the Christian missionaries. The result was moral breakdown and social decay. At the onset of Christianity, some early converts abandoned traditional practices just because they wanted to be free from the tough and strict traditional rules. The early converts were incorporated into the way of life of the Christian missionaries. Nthamburi (1981) in his interview with Kornelio Mukiira noted that those who accepted a new way of life had to cut themselves off from the rest of the society including their relatives and live at the mission station where they were protected from the influence of the traditional expectations. Many *Njuri Ncheke* elders lamented that teachings and preaching in the churches is too much but without proper grounding. *Njuri Ncheke* elders also accused the church leaders of being too lenient with their errant members because they fear losing them and consequently missing their financial contributions. However all the members of the clergy who were interviewed denied the elders' allegations that criminals hide in the churches. According to the clergy, every church has its own system of disciplining and the fact that the system of discipline appears different from *Njuri Ncheke* style does not make it lesser discipline. The elders were in agreement that in their Kimeru traditions, they used to teach their people properly and that is why they were able to have control over them. People knew what was expected of them. But today, according to the elders, most people do not seem to know what they believe in and whom they believe. The diversity in Christian doctrines and teachings makes Christianity even more divided and lacking in its ability to control and monitor their faithfuls, a factor that has led to resilience of *Njuri Ncheke* in Meru County.

Christians emphasize on the principle of forgiveness and claim that the grace of God in which they live in is sufficient, a factor that the elders feel is giving criminals a leeway to misbehavior. It is for this reason, according to the clergy, that even if a converted member testifies openly that he or she killed so and so, such a member cannot be arrested by the pastor and tried for murder. This is because the person is already forgiven by God and is subsequently a new creation.

Condemning such a person again amounts to a violation of the Holy Scriptures. The Biblical principle of forgiveness demands that once a sinner has been forgiven, however big or small the sin may be, the past is forgotten because the forgiven sinner is a new creation. Many *Njuri* elders could not fathom the principle of forgiveness and all they know is that whether forgiven or not, a person must pay for the crime committed. The elders say that nominalism has become too much in the County and needs to be curbed. The elders are challenging the churches to give their believers roots in their beliefs and teachings, and at least tighten their systems of discipline. They should teach their adherents what they should hold and come up with proper mechanisms to instill discipline onto their errant members. They further challenge the church leaders to help fish out evil doers who are hiding in their church congregations. Following the failure of Christianity, the elders have already re-organised themselves. They say they cannot keep quiet and watch their people going astray. To many *Njuri Ncheke* elders, there are crimes for which the culprit must either be punished or pay a fine whether forgiven or not, and as long as this has not been done, the elders consider the culprits errant members of the community.

#### **Failure of the Modern Court System**

By implication, human conflicts have always had both secular and supernatural significance in the Ameru concept of life. All violations of person or property were defined automatically as departures from ancestral traditions. The study revealed that in the Meru traditions, there is a dual concept of justice in which punishment is believed to not only be effected physically here on earth, but also from the ancestors in the invisible spiritual world. There is also the belief that punishment does not only befall the individual offender, but extends to the family, clan and the community at large. In contrast with the Christian conceptions of an all seeing God of love, the Meru god was essentially indifferent to mankind. If angered especially through evil acts of human beings, he could withhold blessings. If placated by rituals, he could be beneficial to them all. It is for this reason that *Njuri Ncheke* has taken up the responsibility to punish, arbitrate, settle disputes and reconcile aggrieved parties. Elders, being in the lowest category of religious specialists in the Meru traditional religion had the duty to ensure that there was harmony to ensure continued blessings for the community at large. The council has therefore remained the highest court of the land, a duty that was further reinforced by the British colonial masters who always respected the decisions of *Njuri Ncheke*.

*Nchiru*, the community's traditional shrine and the headquarters of *Njuri Ncheke* has remained an equivalent of Kenya's supreme courts. The dome-shaped house within the shrine was built in the 1960's and it is the elder's symbol of authority. It is inside this building that serious disputes involving the Meru people are settled. No one enters the building, not even the researcher, except the "Men of *Njuri*". One major cause of the current split in the supreme council is the decision by the aggrieved group to take a *Njuri Ncheke* dispute to a modern court. In a public meeting aired in a local television station, a *Njuri Ncheke* elder who is also a veteran politician in the region said that *Njuri Ncheke* is never taken to court because it is itself a court. He shunned the group that took a *Njuri* case to court as "fake elders" who are ignorant of the Meru traditions. He also criticized the invitation to meet in a classic hotel to deliberate *Njuri Ncheke* issues as suggested by leaders of the aggrieved rival group. The veteran politician said that *Njuri* issues and cases can only be discussed and settled at their traditional shrine at *Nchiru*, the sacred point of the Meru community, not in a hotel.

Like many other African people's, the Meru people believe that God punishes in this life and holds that there must be compensation for the crimes committed. For this reason, *Njuri* punishment is immediate and the punishment must be equal to the crime committed. Punishment for miraa stealing is almost immediate to deter others from doing the same. It is for this reason that residents of Meru County detest the process of involving the police, attending to court cases and producing evidences. The residents of the County are frustrated by the slow pace at the law courts and they prefer to take their cases to *Njuri Ncheke* court where justice is served swiftly. Since its inception by their forefather Kauro-o-Bechau, according to the elders, *Njuri* has always been known for its honesty and fairness in their dealings. Failure to show transparency and honesty would call for a curse on *Njuri* elders from the ancestors. The clergy challenged modern courts to emulate the transparency of *Njuri Ncheke* elders. The catholic clergy strongly commended the elders' court and wished that the findings of this study would be known to the Kenya judicial systems so that they can borrow a leaf from *Njuri* style of judgement.

Lying to *Njuri* elders is in itself a crime and the culprit is always expected to say the truth as the gods and spirits are believed to be aware and always watching. Bulmann (1982) says that beneath it all, there is the African's deeply religious predisposition. The author says that the African does not simply believe in God and the spirits of his ancestors but he lives in the full sense of the term under the eyes of the creator, the

hidden cause of all other causes. It is this fear of the deity and the entire invisible spiritual world that leads to transparency and honesty not only from the officiating elders but the culprits as well. Respondents noted that many a times, the elders do not struggle to fish out offenders from the villages but usually the culprits easily surrender out of the fear of the deity. In a village, small differences and disputes are very common and the immediate intervention and judgements of *Njuri Ncheke*, alongside their rough disciplinary measures creates harmony and order in the villages. Onyancha (2010) notes that a village community is more often than not a theatre of jealousies, conflicts and hatred often caused by myriad of factors. Foster (1967) had made a similar observation earlier when he described villagers as being frequently suspicious of each other, envious, ready to suspect the worst about their neighbours and distrustful in the extreme. The findings in Meru County from the present study confirmed observations made by Onyancha and Foster. The fact that *Njuri Ncheke* elders have immediate solutions to such and are able to create order in the midst of such conflicts makes them authoritative and influential.

Bishop Lawi Imathiu, a retired Methodist clergy was full of praise for *Njuri Ncheke* court and commented that it is transparency and honesty that has greatly contributed to the resilience and popularity of *Njuri* elders' court in the County. Many elders do not believe that there is justice in the modern court system. A respondent recalled how his neighbour, who is a staunch Christian took his miraa thieves to Meru law courts and they were released after two weeks for lack of evidence. Upon release, the two thieves gave the man a thorough beating in the evening when he was going home from a church fellowship. Two days later, five of his goats were stolen and the two released thieves were the main suspects. His wife, though also a staunch Christian got fed up and called *Njuri* elders who arrested the two suspects and took them to the shrine at *Nchiru*. They were given such a thorough beating that left one of them impotent and as a result his wife ran to her home. According to the respondent, the other suspect lost four of his front teeth and to date he has never married meaning that he could also have been rendered impotent. Since they had already sold the goats, their families compensated neighbour with other goats and paid money for the estimated amount of miraa that was stolen earlier, not forgetting a good fine for *Njuri Ncheke* elders' court. The respondent's narration represents many of such cases in the study. It is a pointer to the lack of confidence the people have in the police and the modern courts. There is a general feeling in Meru County that even if one tries the police, this is unlikely to result in much action. Such

incidences have made the Tigania and Igembe people especially ignore the modern law courts in favour of *Njuri Ncheke* court and this has remained a strong basis for their influence and resilience in Meru County.

### **Nature of Politics in Kenya**

Current trends in Kenya seem to be pushing councils of elders into resilience, consequently making them authoritative and influential, *Njuri Ncheke* inclusive. It is common knowledge in Kenya today that for one to succeed in politics, support from the elders is an unavoidable prelude. Currently, local members of parliament and prominent politicians in Meru County are all members of *Njuri Ncheke*. Though it is never said out loudly, *Njuri Ncheke* membership gives one a good standing for political ambitions. This has been the case since the colonial period when the District Commissioner Lambert insisted that all Meru elders who wanted to be appointed at any level of the local administration had to belong to *Njuri Ncheke*, thus increasing initiation into the council. To date, the Meru community holds that a man who leads the community in any capacity must first be a man of *Njuri*, a factor that has made even the staunch Christians to join the council. At the same time, this belief has barred women from political participation, except for the current position of woman representative. As *Njuri* elders spread all over the county, some politicians use them for the purpose of soliciting votes. However, *Njuri* elders strongly refuted the claim that they are used to campaign for politicians. The elders' reiterated that the only thing they do as elders and therefore counsellors by the virtue of their status is to guard the community from electing bad leaders. This explains why *Njuri Ncheke* has become very popular among the rich and the elite who are aspiring political positions. The study found out that this is a factor that has greatly contributed to the resilience of *Njuri Ncheke*.

Respondents both men and women expressed their dissatisfaction with the current involvement of *Njuri Ncheke* in the political affairs of Meru community. Elders lamented that many are getting initiated into the council for personal gain other than the desire to perform the duties associated with the religious institution. The primary aim of initiation to many members is to gain a status that can work in their political favour. Many elders from the political class have no time for other duties like settling disputes, educating the youth and counseling members of the community who need such services. They are only good at giving hefty contributions to support council activities but do not avail themselves physically. This has led to the popular talk of *Njuri* proper and *Njuri* modern in Meru County.

It is therefore clear from the study that *Njuri Ncheke* influence in politics is a major source of their authority in Meru region, and a pointer to their resilience. An interview with a young member of the County assembly gave proof to this finding. He was initiated into the council six months before the last general election while he was thirty six years old. He admitted that before he became a man of *Njuri*, he was very unpopular, only known to his pupils and colleagues in his local primary school where he was a teacher. But when he was initiated into *Njuri Ncheke* and got into the company of “Men of *Njuri*” who are known to be men of substance, word went round the villages that he was now a man to watch. And when he joined the political arena and contested for member of County assembly, he won by a land slide. It is this kind of political success that has attracted many to the council hence leading to its resilience and popularity and this has made the council authoritative and influential.

### Sacred Obligation

The sacred obligation of *Njuri Ncheke* has remained a source of its strength and authority since its inception. The study revealed that even with the exposure to modern change, it is still the feeling of many in Meru community that attempts should be made to relate modern ideas to the religious values and sacredness of their *Zamani*, the very foundation of existence and security for the Meru community. The clergy observed that unlike Christianity, traditional religions do not have scholarly champions or volunteers to advocate their case or modernize their content and expression, but the elders are the custodians of its beliefs, values and practices. *Njuri Ncheke* entity is in itself a representation of the invisible world. In African religion, elders are part and parcel of the invisible world and they belong to the lowest category of religious specialists in the African understanding of the spiritual universe. *Njuri Ncheke* elders are closely linked to the ancestral dead, not only by bonds of kinship but also through constant rituals and ceremonies intended to keep the relationship alive. Traditionally, it was in the process of executing their religious and sacred duties that *Njuri Ncheke* was able to influence the political, economic and social affairs in the Meru community, a role that is clearly resurgent according to the findings of this current study.

It was common knowledge among the elders interviewed that a Meru clan consisted of the living and their ancestors (also called living dead). It lived therefore within not just the temporal world but an interrelated spiritual sphere as well. Reflecting this duality, *Njuri Ncheke* existed within both secular and supernatural religious contexts. On earth, they served as centres for conciliation, addressing conflicts of human interest as they arose. Because all decisions

were ultimately based on ancestral precedent, however, their ultimate task was to determine whether quarrels had caused disharmony among their ancestors as well. A Meru child is taught that impotence, barrenness or drought might follow from a violation of taboos and disrespect for elders, whereas one might be blessed with a large family and productive farm if he were respectful to these powers. It is such sacredness in their perceptions and duties that has made *Njuri Ncheke* return its strength, influence and authority as a religious institution.

Most respondents were in agreement that many elements of the Meru religious heritage have come from God, and as such, cannot be dismissed. Human life, which came from God through the spirits and ancestors was considered sacred and was held in great reverence. Elders narrated the many rituals that surrounded human life all under the jurisdiction of *Njuri Ncheke*. Since life was of utmost importance, it had to be safeguarded very zealously with prayers, rituals, magic and protective charms. All these are irreplaceable roles of *Njuri Ncheke* that cannot be delegated to an individual or another institution hence explain why *Njuri Ncheke* has remained powerful and authoritative. Cleansing rituals can only be performed by *Njuri Ncheke* elders and not a priest or a pastor.

Curses can only be removed through words uttered by *Njuri Ncheke* elders at the sacred point at *Nchiru* in what is known to Meru people as ‘*Kurumuka*’. Such sacred obligations by the council are not transferable. It is logical on this basis that Karl Marx and Fredrick Angels (1957) developed the materialist school interpreting religion arguing that religion can only be overcome if the conditions that gave rise to it are transformed. The beliefs underlying the existence of *Njuri Ncheke* as a religious and social institution are mystical linking to the founder, Kauro-o-Bechau and cannot be reversed or transformed. Their roles and duties are irreplaceable meaning that the conditions that gave rise to the council cannot be transformed hence making the council authoritative and influential.

### CONCLUSION

Empirically, this study established that *Njuri Ncheke* is not just an institution of the past but it is a religious and social institution with all its modern implications. The roles, practices and activities of the council are resurgent in most, if not all their forms. There is no other religious institution, be it modern or traditional that people in Meru County passionately honour with all reverence and respect like *Njuri Ncheke*. They have owned it and made it theirs and it is the pride of every Meru man, Christian or non-Christian to be called a man of “*Njuri*”. The elders have revived their sacred

duties as custodians of the Meru religious beliefs and traditions. However, there is a clear disconnect between the Christian teachings and the practices of *Njuri Ncheke* elders. While in theory the doctrines of all the churches represented in the County are against their adherents membership to the council, practically the same churches are quiet about such doctrines and work hand in hand with the elders with some church leaders being initiated members of *Njuri Ncheke*.

Theoretically, the above disconnect can be attributed to the fact that church teachings and doctrines are dysfunctional while people in Meru County feel that their traditional religious beliefs and practices in the embodiment of *Njuri Ncheke* institution are functional and fulfilling. This agrees with Emile Durkheim's functionalism theory which guided this study that social and religious practices and beliefs that have no function cease to exist but those that have a function remain. It is clear that *Njuri Ncheke* elders as the custodians of the traditional religion are still very relevant. Their religious roles and practices are functional and fulfilling as far as residents of Meru County are concerned and this is what social and religious institutions are all about. In essence, the council has remained the conscience of Meru community. Their persisting roles and practices give solutions to some of their life's problems which Christianity and government institutions are not able to give. They provide answers to some of their life's questions that Christianity and modernity have not provided hence the resilience and popularity. Their religious practices satisfy needs which would not be satisfied elsewhere. These include their cleansing rituals which give assurance of security and protection from premature death. The Christian church has no immediate solution when Christians are victims of either witchcraft or sorcery but *Njuri Ncheke* elders have religious specialists among them who deal with such hence their resilience. People in Meru County find it difficult to continue nursing the Christian hope and salvation which is long coming and so they quickly turn to traditional means of dealing with diseases and other problems. Their measurement of religion and religious institutions is that they should be capable of providing real answers to questions arising from within their existence. As long as *Njuri Ncheke* outshines Christianity and modern institutions in doing this, it will remain functional to the people of Meru County.

### **Recommendations on Resilience of Authority and Influence of Council of Elders in Kenya**

#### **i) Initiating gender representation in elders councils**

One of the areas that the study viewed as important and requires serious consideration is the issue of gender representativeness in councils of elders in Kenya. For

councils of elders in Kenya to succeed and make a mark in a contemporary society that is geared towards affirmative action, they must recognize the importance of gender roles in institutions. *Njuri Ncheke* in particular should develop a policy that removes gender bias in its operations as much as possible so as to recognize the role of women, traditional barriers and misconceptions notwithstanding. In so doing, *Njuri Ncheke* will be able to address community concerns holistically without necessarily painting the picture of a male dominated institution.

#### **ii) Cultivating an open decision making process**

The study recommends that *Njuri Ncheke* process of decision making should be open and inclusive, and must endeavour to reflect the wishes of the majority. Sentiments echoed from the field pointed at a tendency by the council to make decisions and pursue issues that only benefit specific groups of people in the community, a complaint that puts their transparency and honesty to question. This kind of attitude is unexpected from a council that is supposed to serve and unite the entire community. For *Njuri Ncheke* to remain the traditional institution known for honesty, fairness, justice and transparency, the elders must embrace the sacred traditional values passed down to them from their patriarchs, among them, Koomenjue and Kauro-o-Bechau.

#### **iii) Intensification of relevant Christian evangelization in Kenyan communities**

To be more specific, the enculturation approach needs to be fully embraced in many Counties in Kenya. The church in Kenya is called upon to carefully study the entire cultural milieu in which it is evangelizing so that its message is not rendered irrelevant. The thought forms and world views of particular communities should be incorporated into Christianity so that Christianity can fulfill its mission of the development and fulfillment of human beings. Leaders of all Christian denominations should allow African culture and Christianity to blend one another so as meet the needs of Christians and give solutions to their spiritual problems. This will enable Christianity to build itself up within existing viable human communities and forthwith become a people's religion. Although the influence of Pentecostalism in many parts of Kenya is great, enculturation is still achievable.

#### **iv) Financing council of elders**

Concerning lack of financial resources, the study wishes to recommend that councils of elders, *Njuri Ncheke* inclusive, should source for internal and external funding so as to effectively finance their operations. In particular, the Kenyan government should be advised to finance councils of elders at least



for the imperative role they play in silently maintaining order and justice at the local level.

#### v) Recognition of *Njuri Ncheke* in devolved governance in Meru County

The devolved system of governance in Kenya is meant to bring leadership closer to the people at the grassroot level. The Meru people, just like other Kenyans, hope that the devolved system of governance as enshrined in chapter eleven of the constitution fulfills the potential the country anticipated since independence. The success of devolution in Meru County depends on how the County government harnesses the strengths and opportunities of the *Njuri Ncheke* to run the affairs of the people. The fact that such an old religious and social institution like *Njuri Ncheke* continues to exercise considerable influence today is clear proof that indigenous knowledge systems can synergize with modern ones to address challenges that arise from devolved systems of governance.

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