

# Mungiki from African Traditional Religion to Islam, from Islam to Christianity in Kenya: Interrogating

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**Abstract:** *Mungiki is a African traditional religion that emerged in 1987 in Kenya, among the Gikuyu or Kikuyu, the Kenyan largest tribe, they have their traditional god called 'Ngai.' whom they worship and to whom they pray for, Mungiki are with the aims of educating the Kenyan masses to fight against westernization, which they claim was introduced by Christianity and colonization, this will be done through conversion to Gikuyu culture and religion. Christianity has been accused of influencing Gikuyu people to abandon their traditional religion, which annoyed their god, Ngai. The consequences of abandoning African culture and religion, which, according to the group, has been the current cause of the Kenyan calamities which are; injustice, corruptions and bad governance, manifesting in characters of the Kenyan Government officials, Mungiki advocates that all ethnic groups in Kenya should therefore denounce foreign faiths, especially Christianity, and revert to traditional beliefs and practices. According to Mungiki conversion from African traditional religion to another foreign religion is not allowed. The aims of this paper is to interrogate why Mungiki group has contradicted themselves by converting from African traditional religion to Islam, from Islam to Christianity in Kenya an ideology they have earlier rejected and criticized.*

**Keywords:** Mungiki, African Traditional Religion, Islam, Christianity, Kenya.

## Introduction

According to Wamue (2001) Explains that Mungiki is a Gikuyu or Kikuyu word. It is a term that is taking from the word muingi-ki, meaning 'we are the public' Muingi is a term derived from the word nguki which means irindi (crowds) and reflects a belief that destiny entitles people to particular place of their own. The term therefore means 'fishing the crowd from all corners of Kenya. Mungiki also refers to religio-political movement comprises mainly of large masses of Gikuyu tribe of Kenya, mostly they are low income earners they are either drop out or has low academic qualification and with non-Gikuyu Tribes like lous, Maasais and pokots, the group are mainly youth age 18-40, however they are exceptional 40-60 age according to their coordinator the group has about one and half a million members including 400,000 women, and some of their members are in Kenya public universities for examples university of Kenyatta, Nairobi, and Egerton.

Waruinge Ndura is a 1992 secondary school leaver from Nakuru District of Kenya. He is a grandson of ex- Mau Mau General waruinge. He claims to have Co- founded the Mungiki with six others young people in 1987 when he was only 15 years old in form one at Molo secondary school. They claim to have consulted an ex- Mau Mau generals in laikipia and Nyandarwa district of Kenya who approved their plan, the elders that were consulted were ex- Mau Mau fighters who rejected Christianity but wanted to transfer the Gikuyu traditions to younger Kenyan generation orally (Wamue, 2001).

Wamue(2001:460). Describes Mungiki as heir to a long tradition of religio-political revivalism that dates back to the early stages of anti-colonial resistance, which in turn was characterized by a total rejection of modernity. The mandate of Mungiki, then, was to call people to return to Gikuyu's indigenous beliefs and practices, and condemn the white man's culture. It rejects and criticizes Christianity and advocates a return to African traditions beliefs and practices (Wamue, 2001:454 ).

However, the Mungiki legend, (Makokha, 2000). Explain that Mungiki has grown out of the mysterious, only few people understood the ideology and theology of the group. Its members have a god called (Ngai) who reside on Mount Kenya (Kirinyaga) whom they worship and to whom they pray for. So far no written doctrines about Mungiki as a religious sect have been availed to the public, but Mungiki publicly advocate a return to 'African traditions.' Githongo (2000). Explains that Mungiki advocates cultural and religious revival and this has alarmed church leaders and fervent Christians, who have occasionally denounced the activities of the sect.

Their holy communion consists of tobacco sniffing. Mungiki baptizes new members in a river, and with fire. After the initiates are immersed in a river, they walk through smoke as the elders chant certain traditional religious words. Their holy communion is tobacco-sniffing. There are rituals performed, and religious practices used by Mungiki members, which according to (Smart, 1968). Criteria would warrant Mungiki being classified as a religious sect. The dimensions as explained by Smart include: myths, rituals, social institutions, doctrines, ethical teachings and religious experiences. All these are typical characteristics of the sect. They baptize their converts who also take oaths and swear by saying, 'May I die if I reveal our secrets.' They also perform rituals such as offering of sacrifices, which are believed to protect members; sniffing tobacco; praying while facing Mount Kenya (Kirinyaga); and keeping unshaven hair (dreadlocks). Their dress code is the African garb made from animal skin. Although some of them have been spotted wearing animal skins, to conceal their identity, this regalia have been used only on special occasions. Other rituals consist of grown-up men with loin cloths wrapped around them, standing bare foot in rivers, engaging in tobacco sniffing and bathing with blood mixed with urine and goat tripe (Phombeah, cited in Ndande 2008:52).

The sect is deeply spiritual. Mungiki members prostrate themselves and pray strange prayers in forests, along rivers in Central Kenya, and while facing Mount Kenya, which they believe to be the home of their god, Ngai. Their prayers consist of chanting *thaa*, *thaathaya* Ngai, *thaa*, (Hail God, hail God). They also compose and sing praises, but mainly lamentation songs, and offer sacrifices. The lamentations decry the suffering of the Kikuyu “nation,” and ask their god to come down and rescue them (Sunday Standard Correspondent, 2007). In an interview, Waruinge attempted to relate the sect’s way of doing things to that of the Muslims. He cited among other things that just as the Muslims pray facing Mecca, the sect followers pray facing Mountain Kenya. And just as the Muslims are prepared to die for their faith, so the Mungiki would not hesitate to defend what they believe in (Sunday Standard Correspondent, 2007).

### Conceptual Clarification of Terms:

#### The Concept of African Traditional Religion

According to Parrinder (1976:6). Define African traditional religion. He stated thus; when we speak of African traditional religion, we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. The religion that was passed on from generation to generation by the fore bearers of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (outdated) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living in it and by practicing it. African Traditional Religion is based on oral traditions, which means that the basic values and way of life are passed from elders to younger generation ([www.archivalplatform.org/.../Africa](http://www.archivalplatform.org/.../Africa)-accessed on 1 May 2017). Several specialists in anthropology of religion use the term African traditional religion (ATR) to define the traditional belief and the religious practices of the African people Andriamahita (2017).

#### The Concept of Islam

Islam, in the context of the Koran is the embodiment of the word of Allah, means “absolute submission to the will of (God) Allah” Dawood,(1978).According to (Ozigboh, 1988), believes that Islam etymologically derives from the Arabic word Salam or Salama, which means peace, surrender, submission”to the will of God (Allah). The totality of Islamic regulation of the lives of Muslims is comprehensibly as capture by Olayiwola (1988:227), who notes that: “Islam does not admit a narrow view of religion by restricting it within the limits of worship, specific rituals and spiritual beliefs. In its precise meaning, Islam is not only a religion; it is also a way of life that regulates all the aspects of life on the scale of the individual and the nation (Olayiwola,1988).

#### The Concept of Christianity

Christianity is one of the world major monotheistic religions. Christians believe in Jesus Christ and follow his teachings. Christians believe Jesus is God’s own son, sent by God to become human. As the son of God, Jesus is divine, but he was also a human being who lived among us on earth, over 2,000 years ago. Followers of Jesus are part of God’s people, whose heritage includes the Jewish people and the Christian Church throughout the world today (Mindekirken, 2011). Christians believe in “All Mighty God” and in Christ is his son. The belief in Christ is the essence of Christianity (Andre, 2017).

#### Aims and Objectives of Mungiki

Mungiki argued that traditional religion would unite and mobilize the Kenyan masses to fight against the yoke of mental slavery, which they claim was introduced by Christianity and colonization Mungiki argued that the liberation of the masses from mental captivity must come through a complete conversion to indigenous ways of life, in particular culture and religion. All ethnic groups in Kenya should therefore denounce foreign faiths, especially Christianity, and revert to traditional beliefs and practices Wamue (2001).

The ceremony of reversing to traditions is referred to as *kigongoona* (ceremony of spirituality) which, according to the Mungiki group was lost with the introduction of Christianity. Since that time the Kikuyu, like all the other tribes of Kenya, have lost their spirituality, and the whole country has been tarnished by foreign worship Wamue (2001:461). This loss of the African religion has in turn brought about many social, economic and political problems. Mungiki blame Christianity for creating serious divisions among the Kikuyu, which has annoyed Ngai (God in Kikuyu). In this case, Mungiki calls the Kikuyu and the other people of Kenya to adopt traditional religion Wamue (2001).

As an indispensable condition for any change, Mungiki calls for the teaching of *Kirira* (African indigenous values). Each ethnic community should be taught their religious values and how they can mobilize people in times of need. A case in point is the role played by the Kikuyu religion during the Mau Mau struggle against colonial oppression Wamue (2001:461).The teaching of African traditional values should lead to *guthera* (socio-religious cleansing ritual). This consists of traditional rites of denouncing foreign cultures and faiths. Mungiki advocates for a more genuine and practical belief. Christianity, according to them, has never been beneficial to Africa, since it has always been used as an instrument of oppression Wamue (2001).The Mungiki sect is a purportedly a revolutionary group which aims is to spearhead African socialism, to mobilize and bring economic, political and social changes in society so that the masses can control their destiny(Murthui, 2000). Waruinge has argued that ‘Kenya today is controlled by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Americans, the British, and the Freemasons. That is why Kenya cannot initiate its own development. All these have promoted is tribalism, nepotism and individualism, rather than socialism (Susan, 2012).

Kenya today cannot initiate its own development and has sold all its properties to westerners in the name of liberalization Mr. Waruingi blames the present system for allegedly helping the spread of Aids and devil worship in Kenya (Murthui, 2000).

The Mungiki fraternity is adamant in its denial of the accusations that its members engage in oath-taking and forced female circumcision, as well as taking Africans back to savagery and barbarism. They readily defend their belief as ideal for development, by arguing that neither the Japanese nor Chinese abandoned their religion or culture, yet they have attained high economic development. Equally, Africans should have been allowed to keep their religion and culture. The Mungiki see the accusations against them as part of a smear campaign in order to disparage them." Mungiki's religious practices are entrusted in shrines. These shrines are situated in rural areas with the most important one being Mukurwe wa Gathanga. This shrine is located in Murang'a, specifically in Kiharu Division. Other shrines are located in Murang'a and Gaturi Market Wamue (2001).

Although the Mungiki is almost exclusively a Gikuyu affairs, the group expects to embrace all other Kenyans. This would be achieved through similar but autonomous movements that would revive the heritage of other African peoples, who have their own specific beliefs and practices. Kirinyaga Kingdom is seen by the Mungiki as the first of the community-based kingdoms that will be established in their country. Waruinge says with the certitude of a seer: 'It is a bit like the Baganda, Acholi, and other traditional Kingdoms of Uganda' Kenyans will witness the inauguration of, among others, the Mijikenda (Coast), Abagusii (Nyanza), Akamba (Eastern), and Abaluhya (Western) kingdoms. (The names in brackets refer to provinces.) Like the Kirinyaga Kingdom, Murungu, the traditional God of the Gikuyu, will govern these tribal kingdoms, which will rely on God for guidance and sustenance. Each kingdom will select a council of elders who will in turn appoint representatives to sit in a national house of representatives. The elders will use a national cultural code that will unite all Kenyans, while fighting undesirable cultural practices Wamue (2001).

### **Gikuyu people and the African Traditional Religion in Kenya**

According to Leakey (1954: 43). In his book *Defeating Mau Mau*, describes the traditional Kikuyu religion as one that might closely resemble Christianity in the Old Testament. Before any European influence in East Africa, the Kikuyu believed in one God, commonly known as Nagi, Mwene Nyaga, or Murungu depending upon the particular sub-tribe. This one all-powerful God, according to Leakey, delighted in the sacrifice of animals and, as in many Christian religions, was a priest that could pray directly to

As the dwelling-place of Ngai, Kirinyaga Mountain was sacred. During prayer, the Kikuyu faced the mountain, in the same way that their ancestor Gikuyu was told by God (Ngai) to raise his hands towards the mountain whenever he made a sacrifice. Traditionally, too, people built their houses with their main entrances facing the mountain, and the dead were buried with their heads facing the mountain. Gikuyu made sacrifices on great occasions, such as the rites of passage, planting time, before crops ripened, at the harvest of the first fruits, at the ceremony of purifying a village after an epidemic, and most of all when the rains failed or delayed. Although sacrifice is now extremely rare, the Kikuyu rain-making ceremony in March 1997 prove that, in extreme cases, sacrifices will still be made, despite the protests of the Christian clergy (Jens, 2000). According to (Jens, 2000) identified kikuyu prayer of sacrifice to their god Ngai thus:

Revered Elder who lives on Mount Kenya, you who make mountains tremble and rivers flood,  
we offer to you this sacrifice that you may bring us rain. People and children are crying, sheep,  
goats, and cattle are crying. Mwene-ngai, we beseech you with the blood and fat of this lamb  
which we are going to sacrifice to you.

With the embrace of the white man's God came the desire of the white man to spread that religion. Shortly after the first settlers began to arrive, Christian missionaries followed in droves. Not only did these missionaries attempt to convince the native populations to accept Christianity as the one and only true religion, but when these same missionaries witnessed firsthand traditional religious and social practices of the Kikuyu, they attempted to abolish such practices. The loss of these traditional practices along with the influx of a foreign religion and unfair land practices would form a strong basis for the Mau Mau movement. These newly introduced religious beliefs and the banning of certain traditional practices caused conflict in Kenya (Leakey 1954: 46).

### **Mungiki Confrontation with the Kenyan Government**

On 3 March 2002, about 300 Mungiki youths, wielding machetes, axes, and other crude weapons, rampaged through an Estate, in Nairobi's Kenya called Kariobangi killing between 20 and 23 people and injuring 31 others. Allegedly, their motive was revenge for two of their members, who had been killed by an overwhelming Luo ethnic militia in Kariobangi known as the Taliban (Kagwanja 2003; 45). The violence described above preceded the Kenyan government's decision to outlaw Mungiki, Taliban and 16 other sects, militias and gangs in Kenya After the 2002 election (IRIN, 2002).

For instance, in November 2006, Waruinge declared war on the Freemasons in Kenya, referring to the members as devil worshippers. He observed that most of their members were Kenyan politicians. A group of 400 sect members with matches boxes and petrol in their hands had marched along Nyerere Road singing songs and sniffing tobacco on their way to the premises where the Freemason temple is located. They chanted, 'we will burn it down It promotes devil worship,' but they were dispersed by police

before they could torch the building. In retaliation, they burned down Muranga and Nyahururu police stations, which are miles away from Nairobi (Kilonzo, 2012:238).

Police; have arrested hundreds of people suspected of being members of the outlawed Mungiki following a weekend incident in which women were stripped naked for wearing trousers (Alice 2000).The group beat up and stripped six women, dressed in trousers accusing them of dressing improperly. The members of the controversial sect had been barred by the police from holding prayers in a city estate, kayole, on Sunday before they turned their anger on the women. Police used tear gas to disperse the group as they broke and looted property from the nearby church. There has been public concern over the activities of the Mungiki sect which claims to be a religious organization whose doctrines are based on traditional practices of the Gikuyus's majority tribe in Kenya (Alice 2000).

The National convention executive council (NCNC) a civil society organization lobbying for political change said acts of depravity and rape under the guise of defending African traditions should not be allowed to happen. Mungiki or anybody else cannot arrogate to themselves the moral, dress or cultural policemen.' The council said (Alice, 2000). The provincial administration in the capital, Nairobi, has vowed to deal firmly with members of the sect. The city's provincial commissioner, Mr., Cyrus Maina, described Mungiki followers as 'a bunch of criminals' who were subverting the administration under the guise of religion (Alice, 2000).

### **Mungiki from African Traditional Religion to Islam, From Islam to Christianity in Kenya: Interrogating**

Mungiki argues that there is no conversion from African traditional religion to another foreign religion. According to Mungiki each society in Africa has its own religious system. Therefore, a person has to be born into a particular society in order to assimilate the religious system of the society to which he belongs (Wamue, 2001). Africans are noted to be highly religious. This is what Professor Mbiti remarked about as "Africans are notoriously religious, and each society in Africa has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices." (Mbiti, 1969:1) He explained that religion in Africa pervades into all the aspects of life and, therefore, impossible to isolate it from other aspects of the African society and culture. But to Amon see, Mungiki a Kenyan African traditional religion contradicts this ideology by converting into Muslims, then later Christianity, which goes contrary to their earlier doctrines as captioned above.

On 2nd September, 2000, a ceremony was held at Mombasa Sakina mosque, thirteen Mungiki leaders converted to Islam, These were the National Coordinator, Ndura Waruinge who was renamed Ibrahim, the Chairman, Maina Njenga who was renamed Mohammed, provincial coordinator Waithaka Wagacha who got the name Hassan, Kamau Mwathi who was renamed Mohammed, Kimani Ruo who was renamed Hussein and Wangari who represented women, she was renamed Khadija (Peter, 2003:38). In a few following months, hundreds of ordinary Mungiki followers, especially in Nakuru, converted to Islam, enrolled in Islamic classes and received books and other materials containing the basic literature on Islam from Kenya's Muslim community (Peter, 2003:38). The Chairman of the council of imams and preachers of Kenya, Addressing a press conference at Mombasa Sakina mosque, Sheikh Ali Shee, Said his council had now accepted them as a Muslims. There was a chant of 'Taqbir, Allah Akbar.' Which means (God is great) when the announcement was made.

The Mungiki leaders expressed thanks to Muslims for accepting them, and he appealed for financial and moral support to spread the religion and create a 'nation guided by the sharia.' (The Nation September 3, 2000). The 13 Mungiki sect followers who converted to Islam should be monitor for six months to ensure they adhered to the tenets of the faith. A Muslim leader suggested that a special team be formed to monitor the progress of the new converts. The national Islamic Preachers, Association of Kenya secretary general Sheikh Yusuf Turkana said the new converts have to take special lessons in the faith from recognized Islamic institutions, such as Madarasa, for at least a year (Patrick, 2000).

The conversion to Islam by Mungiki leaders and some of their followers was seen as a move to gain support from the Muslim community in times of harassment by the government. This was evidenced by Waruinge's statement during the conversion ceremony when he asked the government to stop harassing Mungiki members as they had converted to Islam. In turn, Muslim Imams warned that the harassment of Mungiki members was to be seen as an insult to Muslims worldwide (Daily Nation, 2000). Nevertheless, Mungiki's conversion to Islam was not accepted by all Muslims. It led to strong opposition from moderate Muslims and supporters of the ruling elite from the Mombasa (Coast) who accused the group of using Islam as a hiding place away from government's harassment (Daily Nation, 2000). The Muslim Leaders accuse the Mungiki sect of having a hidden agenda and practicing double standards. Muslim scholar sheikh Mohammed Sheikh warned that Muslims will not allow a few people to play around with Islam pretending they were converts (The Nation, 2000). The leadership of the Kenyan renegade Islamic 'Mungiki' group has dismissed threats by Muslim clerics to expel the group from the faith because 'Islam is a religion not a political party where one is asked to quit. No one can send a person packing in a religion of God.' (Okoko, 2000).

According to (Kilonzo, 2012:234). In December 2000, Waruinge and 50 sect members attended a Church service before being arrested, and this was a clear act of camouflage. This act met great criticism from Sheikh Banda who pointed out that Islam

would not allow hypocrisy. A few days later, Waruinge was released from police cells and he proclaimed that he was saved. He changed his name to Ezekiel Ndura Waruinge and started his own church. In October 2009, when Maina Njenga, the national chairman, was released from jail, he was prayed for and converted to become a Christian at the Jesus is Alive Ministries, a church headed by Dr. Bishop Margaret Wanjiru, the Assistant Minister of housing and the member of parliament of Starehe Constituency in Nairobi. And he promised to disband Mungiki.

Two decade ago Maina Nenga created a quasi-religious sect known as Mungiki, whose young men snuffed tobacco, prayed to face Mount Kenya and took oaths of loyalty. The gang is synonymous with, Killings, extortion, and organized crime. In early December, Njenga seemed to take a step in the other direction, renouncing the group he lead for 20 years and being baptized in to one of east African largest church. An estimated 500 Mungiki member follow suit in the baptism as Njenga had promised. 'Let those who were doubting know we are now moving on while they have left behind'. He said. The leader of the Kenya mafia claim to be converted to Christianity during a 29 months of detention on murder charges against him drop due to lack of evidence (Christianity Today, 2010). About five thousand Mungiki members have renounced their old ways as they were baptized at the Jamhuri High School swimming pool. Led by their former leader Maina Njenga, the members maintain that their conversion was a genuine change. Maina Njenga says the positive revolution of the Mungiki will continue until all the members have converted to Christianity (Andrew, 2011).

### Conclusion

The Mungiki is a Kenyan African traditional religion that rejects Christianity and decries what they regard as the more degenerate aspect of western culture including cinemas, and wearing of Miniskirts and trousers among women in Kenya. The goal of Mungiki is to turn Kenyans to practice African traditional Religion, African socialism to mobilize and bring economic, political and social change in the societies so that the masses can control their destiny. Also to fight against bad governance and social ills facing the Kenyan society and to establish a just nation, Mungiki claim that the only solution to African problems is conversion from foreign religion to African traditional religion, and that conversion from African Traditional religion to another foreign religion is not tolerated. The Mungiki contradict their earlier ideology by changing their faith from African traditional religion to Islam, from Islam to Christianity in Kenya.

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