

**TANGAZA COLLEGE**  
**THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA**

**GICHANGA, SAMUEL MWATHI, S.P.S.**

**THE CATHOLIC PRIEST AS AN AFRICAN ELDER:  
A Research on the Agikuyu Elderhood**

Supervisor  
**Dr. Andrew Lujuo**

A long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the  
Bachelor of Theology

**NAIROBI 2009**

**TO**

All Priests and students of St Patrick's Missionary Society

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am grateful to God for all his blessings in my life. I thank my family, especially my parents, who have narrated tirelessly their experiences and memories of their parents and brought me up in a caring atmosphere. I thank too the family of St Patrick's Missionary Society to whom this work is dedicated. It is in them I have come to appreciate who I am and hope to be better as I live and work with them. I also thank my supervisor Dr Andrew Lujuo for his willingness to see me through this work. He took time out of his busy schedule to assist and guide me. I wish to thank Fr Joseph Njoroge, a scripture scholar in St Thomas Aquinas, and other people who willed that I interview them. Thank you for your wonderful insights. My thanks again go to Fr Sean Barry, SPS, for accepting to proofread my work. My special thanks to Rev. James Kariuki, C. M., for his friendship and his personal assistance throughout this work. Thanks a million!

## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading and scientific research methods and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Theology. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited and acknowledged.

Signed:.....

Name of Student:..... Samuel Mwathi Gichanga.....

Date..... 19/11/2009.....

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my personal approval as the college supervisor.

Signed:.....

Name of Supervisor:..... DR. ANDREW LUJAO.....

Date..... 20/11/2009.....

# CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
STUDENT'S DECLARATION.....	iv
CONTENTS.....	v
GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Motivation.....	2
Objective and Aim.....	3
Significance of the Study.....	3
Scope of the Work.....	3
Limitations.....	4
Methodology and Structure of the Work.....	4
CHAPTER ONE	
ELDERHOOD IN CHRISTIANITY.....	5
Introduction.....	5
1.1 Elderhood in Old Testament.....	5
1.2 Elderhood in New Testament.....	9
1.3 Ordination in the New Testament.....	13
1.4 Elderhood in Early Christian Community.....	15
Conclusion.....	16
CHAPTER TWO	
ELDERHOOD IN KIKUYU COMMUNITY.....	17
Introduction.....	17
2.1 Origin and Myth.....	17
2.2 Rites of Passage.....	18
2.3 Elderhood.....	29
2.4 Categories of Elders.....	20
2.5 Historical Roles of Elders.....	22
2.6 Constraints and Conflicts of Roles.....	25
Conclusion.....	26
CHAPTER THREE	
CATHOLIC PRIEST AS AN AFRICAN ELDER.....	27
Introduction.....	27

3.1 Priest.....	27
3.2 Jesus the Ideal Elder.....	30
3.3 African Setting.....	32
3.4 Catholic Priest as an Agikuyu Elder.....	33
3.5 Council of Elders.....	34
3.6 Rite of Institution into Agikuyu Elderhood.....	35
Conclusion.....	37
CHAPTER FOUR	
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	38
Introduction.....	38
4.1 Importance of Making Priests African Elders Today.....	38
4.2 Challenges of Making Priest as Elders today.....	40
4.3 Recommendations.....	42
Conclusion.....	46
GENERAL CONCLUSION.....	47
BIBLIOGRAPY.....	51
GLOSSARY.....	54
APPENDIX.....	55

# GENERAL INTRODUCTION

## Introduction

This is the year of priests. Pope Benedict XVI dedicated this year to priests in order to encourage the striving for spiritual perfection and growth of vocations. This year is meant to be what Cardinal Claudio Hummes says, “a year during which we can discover anew the beauty and importance of the priesthood and of each priest.”<sup>1</sup> In line with this discovery, we are going to delve into the topic “Catholic priest as an African elder.”

One research that was conducted in Nairobi discovered that “90 percent of the Kikuyu Catholic Priests in the Nairobi Diocese have been consecrated as Kikuyu elders. The remaining 10 percent are under pressure to do so.”<sup>2</sup> This sounds like exaggerated statistics but the point is clear, priests are being made elders. While this research was conducted on Agikuyu priests and in Nairobi Diocese, it is worth noting right from the beginning that this practice is found in other ethnic communities and dioceses as well.<sup>3</sup> We are going to concentrate on the Agikuyu elderhood for the sake of convenience.

Joining religious ranks brings status, class, power and privilege.<sup>4</sup> This, however, comes with responsibility and a call to serve the community. In Africa, community is valued very much and a priest is expected to uphold that value

---

<sup>1</sup> NJUE, J., “*The Gift of Priesthood and Celibacy*” 16<sup>th</sup> June, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> H. Miller, *Exploring Wisdom of Africa*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to the Appendix

<sup>4</sup> Cf. G. DOLAN, “Accountability” in *Daily Nation* 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2008.

whenever possible. Some priests have been recognized by their generosity and service to the community and thus acknowledged by people as elders. This applies to missionaries as well as local or diocesan priests.

Ordination of Catholic priests automatically raises the status of a man into a position of responsibility. The person could be young or old. One is called to service in the community and a witness to the Gospel. Since the Church is found within cultures and different ethnic backgrounds, there has been a call to inculturate the gospel, to make it closer to the lives of people it addresses.

It has emerged that some dioceses have made it a custom to make their newly ordained priests elders while in other dioceses individual priests request older priests and friends to make them elders. The ordained priest is recognized as a person equipped with special knowledge and skills and one prepared to become a spiritual father of many. It is such assurance that provides a priest with the confidence and courage to be included as elder within the larger Agikuyu family.<sup>5</sup>

### **Motivation**

While the Church is not asked or expected to endorse the rite of institution to Agikuyu elderhood in any way,<sup>6</sup> it might be worth investigating on such a practice. The Agikuyu people have grown in leaps and bounds and expanded to areas that hinder their unity. They are a people who are badly hit by Westernization. Their cultural practices are facing out or changing forms. The issue of elderhood is one such practice. The penetration of Christianity into the Agikuyu traditional elderhood has called for its re-articulation. The Bible and interaction with other communities in Kenya have thrown light on the realm of Agikuyu elderhood after years of

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. H. Miller, *Exploring Wisdom of Africa*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. H. Miller, *Exploring Wisdom of Africa*, 13-14.

evangelization and interactions. As a young Gikuyu man and a candidate for the priesthood, I take advantage of the Year of Priests to make sense of “The Catholic priest as an African elder.” I would like to know what the Bible and the Agikuyu people have to say about elders and to know whether I qualify to be an African elder at priestly ordination. I have seen newly ordained priests being made elders and this always raises question in my mind whether they qualify as such.

### **Objective and Aim**

The objective of this study is to trace elderhood in the Bible and in the Agikuyu community, to establish who is an African priest, what is expected of him and what qualifies him as an elder in the Christianized African communities especially in Kenya. It is aimed to enlighten those priests who have been made elders in the Catholic Church and those who are being prepared to become such so that they may be of effective service to their communities.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study attempts to show a link and continuity in traditional Agikuyu elderhood and Christianity today. It will be a contributing study towards inculturation. It will also throw light on new frontiers for mission especially in the local Church where the local priests are encouraged to evangelize the cultures that they know better than the missionaries. The study seeks to harmonize Christianity and African cultures.

### **Scope of the Work**

This work is on the broad area of mission. It is a research on how Agikuyu traditional religion integrates with Christianity. In order to do this, it touches on Scripture, Sacraments and Liturgy. Thus it is a study towards inculturation.

## **Limitations**

This work majors on the Agikuyu people and thus falls short of being all inclusive. It is done at a time when Kenya is experiencing serious tribal divisions that escalated in post-election violence in 2007; hence, people are looking for a way to reconcile ethnic communities rather than falling into tribal cocoons. In addition, there is very little work that has been written on the subject of this research especially on the Agikuyu side of view.

## **Methodology and Structure of the Work**

This work will rely on library research and interviews. We are also going to make use of the internet. The work will be in four chapters. Chapter One will deal with elderhood in the Scriptures leading to early Christian communities. Chapter Two will be exploring elderhood in the Agikuyu community while Chapter Three will seek to look at the Catholic priest as an African elder in line with Jesus the Ideal Elder and the Agikuyu Elders. Finally, Chapter Four will offer us the way forward showing the importance and challenges of making priests African elders today.

# CHAPTER ONE

## ELDERHOOD IN CHRISTIANITY

### Introduction

In the history of Christianity, certain individuals are recognized as elders. They were entrusted with the task of leading community. These individuals were honoured for their maturity, wisdom, courage and their concern for others. Others came about to discharge the responsibility of helping the community in worship. These are the people we are calling elders. We are going to trace elderhood from both the Old Testament and New Testament. After that, we are going to look at ordination in the New Testament before looking at elderhood in early Christian community.

### 1.1 Elderhood in Old Testament

The word presbyter literally means elder. It is Jewish in expression but universal in theme. Usually older men full of wisdom and noted for their integrity are given this term. Such elders form advisory council to the King, who at least listens to them, knowing that he ignores their advice at his own peril. Such elders are a part of the history of Egypt, Babylon, Israel and all the ancient people.<sup>7</sup>

In Old Testament the emergence of elders started in what we could call tribes. The development of priesthood is much later. We can trace elderhood to the patriarchs

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. W. J. BAUSCH, *Ministry*, 20.

of Israel who headed their families and tribal affiliations.<sup>8</sup> The story of Abraham offers us an illustration of an elder dedicated to the welfare of his family and the future generations. We see him offering sacrifices which at that time seemed “to have been a function of family or tribal leadership.”<sup>9</sup>

The mention of Melchizedek in Gen14:18-20 is rather confusing in the development of Old Testament elderhood. This appears to be the insertion of a redactor of the Priestly Tradition to convey the role of a priest in the author’s contemporaries. This is why Nathan Mitchell refers to the story as ‘mysterious.’<sup>10</sup> That notwithstanding, Melchizedek had a clear role that is connected with sacrifice. He is identified as king and priest and as such he had a right to a tithe. He is one who serves God Most High and in this way he was connected with priesthood.<sup>11</sup>

Establishment of elders in Israel goes back to Moses, whose father-in-law urged Moses to choose able men from all people who are God-fearing and honest to set them as officers and judges over the people at all times (Ex 18:13-27). Moses was ranked highest among them. He is the one who approached God because he was the “full leader and others are subordinate to him.”<sup>12</sup> Although Moses is not ‘ordained’ as a priest we see under him the ‘ordination’ of Aaron (Ex 29).

The account of the Exodus was important in the development of an elderhood role among the Israelites. It is here we encounter the ‘ordination’ of Aaron as priest (Ex 29). Moses appears as an elder who presides over the ‘ordination’ of Aaron. In the words of Mitchell, Moses is presented as “a leader, go-between in matters affecting Israel’s relation with God.”<sup>13</sup> Whether Moses was a priest or not is disputed

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 20-21.

<sup>12</sup> W. J. BAUSCH, *Ministry*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 24.

by scholars. However, “If tribal leadership, mediation between God and people, and transmission of divine commands constitutes “priestly” activities, then we can say that Moses acted as a priest in the transition period between exodus from Egypt and the beginning of Hebrew settlement in Canaan.”<sup>14</sup>

When the Israelites settled in the land of Canaan, the emergence of a recognizable class of priests was evident. This comes out in the Book of Judges Chapters 17 and 18. We meet Micah “who lives in the mountain region of Ephraim and who has hired a young Levite to act as his priest in exchange for food, clothing, shelter and salary (Judg 17: 7-13).”<sup>15</sup> The employment of this young Levite happened to replace Micah’s son who was holding the job then (Judg 17:5). It was therefore a blessing in disguise for the young Levite to have gotten the job. This is how the Levites emerged as a professional class of priests.<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that the Levites did not need ‘ordination’ but simply acquired their priestly functions by observation. It was a “practical craft” for them.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it is imperative to note here too that there were some non-Levitical priests like Micah’s son. Here we see Micah as an elder in need of the assistance of a priest.

The story of Eli brings out the roles of elders and priests. These two functions appear to be linked or coalesced. Priests were linked with a pilgrimage centre at Shiloh. The Israelites came here to offer sacrifices to God. They needed someone to offer them advice and to help them offer their sacrifices. Thus, priests were a kind of oracular consultants and sanctuary attendant. “It is possible that by the time of Samuel

---

<sup>14</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 28.

the priestly function of oracular consultant had undergone development and included the giving of torah (“teaching”) in legal or juridical matters.”<sup>18</sup>

After the Elide priests, another figure, Zadok, appears on the scene almost as mysterious as Melchizedek did in Genesis. Like the Levite who was attached to Micah, the Zadokites were linked with David. David qualified to be an elder in his position as king. The Zadokites were a subordinate group that acted as priests on behalf of the King. Due to the King having a separate role other than a priestly role, the Israelites were reluctant to call their kings priests. However, David performed some priestly activities like blessing, an activity restricted to priests. Due to such actions the definition of a priest changed from its inferior connotation of sanctuary assistance and consultant to one who presided at sacrifices and blessed people.<sup>19</sup> This is a role that is entrusted to elders today. Thus King David qualified to be an elder-priest.

Before turning our attention to the New Testament, let us conclude this section with the Maccabean priesthood. The Maccabean priesthood emerged during the Hellenistic crisis. These were a group of non-zadokite priests that claimed the title of high priests. We should remember that in Genesis we encountered Melchizedek who served God the Most High. The Maccabees claimed to be a priestly family. However, they did not fit that rank in the Israelite community because they were not of the Zadokite line.<sup>20</sup> They took over the temple in Jerusalem and ended up as an urban group of elders and priests.

Around the second century before Christ, the elders had devolved into a kind of senate. Each territory in Palestine had its group of ruling elders or Sanhedrin. The elders were installed by the laying on of hands but were not priests. Their role was of

---

<sup>18</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 32-34.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 56.

judging, guiding and presiding over the local community. They carried some authority and could preside over the local courts.<sup>21</sup> We are going to see some of these functions in the New Testament.

We have seen that in the Old Testament, elders were institutionalised from the need to serve their community. They emerged from families, tribe and a nation. The patriarchs are acknowledged as elders because they guided and led the people in developments of various kinds. We saw too that there were other groups of people recognized as elders but were inferior in status. These groups of elders assisted the patriarchs and Kings to carry out their roles without much interference. They were entrusted with advising, judging and leading the community in collaboration with the patriarchs or King. Intertwined in this development was the ‘mysterious’ emergence of figures that carried out the functions of priests. These were figures like Melchizedek and Zadok. The two served Abraham and David respectively. In the next part, we shall see how elders and priests were organised and how their roles were institutionalised into offices of bishop, elder/presbyter and deacon.

## **1.2 Elderhood in New the Testament**

During the time of Jesus there were different factions or groupings of elders that promoted different ideas. Jesus appeared in the scene in a time of transition. These were groupings such as Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots. Christian imagination usually views the Pharisees as “wicked antagonists.”<sup>22</sup> However, the Pharisees of Jesus’ time were the most “influential renewal group in Palestine.”<sup>23</sup> They believed that temple purity was not exclusive to priests but should be extended to all Jews in everyday life. They saw the needs of extending holiness to daily activities. We can say that they were what we could call today ‘pro-democracy’. They

---

<sup>21</sup> Cf. W. J. BAUSCH, *Ministry*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 77.

<sup>23</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 78.

were responding to the “sign of the times” in a world strongly charged with Greek thinking.<sup>24</sup>

The Sadducees are said to have derived from “Zadok” an indication that they may have been organised within the priestly circles. They would have resisted any changes in the *status quo* because of their social and economical situation. They were elders that were satisfied with the way things were. Thus they were interested in the law code of the Pentateuch. John the Baptist refers to them and the Pharisees as the “brood of vipers” (Mt 3:7).<sup>25</sup>

The Essenes may have withdrawn during the Hellenist crisis when the Zadokite priesthood lost its supremacy to Maccabean priesthood. They, Zadokites, had a vision of creating a world characterized by purity.<sup>26</sup> We can refer to them as a group of elders that envisioned a purely religious community in view of apocalyptic speculation.<sup>27</sup>

The Zealots were a pessimistic group of elders that felt that waiting for an apocalyptic new age was a pipe dream. They were aggressive in demanding radical action, not patience. They seemed to be an underground network of freedom fighters.<sup>28</sup>

Elderhood and service among the earliest Christian communities possessed “powers” and “authority” to influence communities. Elders manifested leadership in their words and deeds even though the gospels avoided using the term priest since they were not holding any office. “Jesus selected certain disciples, ordained them to

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 78f.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 76ff.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 82.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 82ff.

the apostleship (or priesthood/episcopacy), and commissioned them to continue these offices.”<sup>29</sup>

The twelve are perceived as a divinely established college of apostles whose successors are the bishops. Mitchell says that “Originally, the term ‘apostle’ described a function rather than an office, nor was that function limited to the twelve.”<sup>30</sup> We can therefore extend office of elders to more people than specially chosen ones. This idea of elders is much developed in Pauline writings where we come to more organised body of elders such as deacons and presbyters. Before we look at this development, let us turn our attention briefly to Johannine literature.

The Johannine community initially did not recognize elders but believed in the guidance of the Paraclete that Jesus promised. “John’s gospel itself is strangely silent about traditions related to early Christian ‘authorities’ like the twelve.”<sup>31</sup> John invested much on the beloved disciple as the witness. It is this beloved disciple’s witness and the paraclete that was considered sufficient to promote integrity in the community. However, this did not last long. By the time Second and Third John were written, there was clear evidence of leaders. For example, Second John was written by a presbyter, meaning ‘elder’ (2 Jn 1). The delay of the second coming of Christ necessitated a different style of leadership.

Church leadership in Paul’s time began as a household affair. This may have “provided a ‘training ground’ for leadership in the local communities established by Paul.”<sup>32</sup> Some communities had councils of elders but with a single person as prime

---

<sup>29</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 108.

<sup>30</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 117.

<sup>31</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 147.

<sup>32</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 123.

leader/elder. We gather in 1 Peter and the Johannine epistles that in their communities, elders were grouped around a resident president.<sup>33</sup>

There are three Greek terms that are evident in the New Testament, that is, *episkopos* “bishop”, *presbeteros* “elder” and *diaconos* “servant” that indicate categories of elders in early Christian communities. The term *episkopos* is more Gentile than Jew. It was used in a civil and secular way as a term of service and also power. It was a term applied to lay people not to a priestly caste and in itself carried no priestly or ritual overtones. When Paul is returning to Jerusalem from his third missionary journey, he summons the elders of Ephesus to Miletus and addresses them, telling them to be responsible overseers “*episcopoi*” of the church of God.<sup>34</sup>

The other group, the *presbeteros*, was a title of honour more than of function. We said the term presbyter literally means elder. In the early Christian community, an elder was a distinguished, mature Christian who was faithful and fruitful. Mitchell presents an argument by Douglas Powell about the presbyters in this way:

...‘presbyter’ is a status title, while ‘bishop’ and ‘deacon’ are functional titles related to ministries among the Christian people. By this he (Douglas) means that “presbyter” was used to denote not a ministry or function or service in the community, but the status accorded to those persons who were ‘senior’ in authority. This seniority status, with concomitant prestige and respect, belonged to those whose *conversion* and ‘rebirth’ through faith in Jesus was long-standing and fruitful.<sup>35</sup>

To want to be an elder is to want to do a noble work. It is a status that requires one to have impeccable character. Indeed, that is why 1 Tim 5: 17 says that such an elder “deserves a double honour.” Since the origin, presbyter and *episkopos* were non-liturgical and non priestly, they were primarily titles of leadership. These were the people who modelled their lives on the ministry of Jesus.<sup>36</sup> They stirred the

---

<sup>33</sup> Cf. W. J. BAUSCH, *Ministry*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> K. B. OSBORNE, *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry*, 47.

<sup>35</sup> N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 154.

<sup>36</sup> K. B. OSBORNE, *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry*, 50ff.

community and encouraged the neophytes to emulate them. They were agents of change.

### 1.3 Ordination in the New Testament

Ordination in the Roman Catholics Church is a sacrament believed to have been instituted by Christ. The ordained ministry is sacramentally rooted in the ministry of Jesus and entrusted to the apostles. The idea of apostolic succession emerged here.<sup>37</sup> This is a point debated by scholars. The point here is not to trace such argument but to verify whether there was some form of ordination in the New Testament era.

In the Roman Catholic Church there has been a tendency to limit priests to the sacramental dimension of ministry. However, the specialised ministry of the ordained is not limited to liturgical or sacramental actions only. Jesus did not function as a priest according to the rituals of Old Testament or of the temple of Jerusalem. He is associated as a freelance preacher dealing with all kinds of people. His presence in the society manifested God's love among his people. He offered hope and sought to create reconciliation and forgiveness. He took time for his personal prayer too.<sup>38</sup>

We see too that liturgical actions were not the primary functions of Paul or his co-workers. They devoted their energies to preaching the gospel of Christ and building up communities of Christians. Though they had a right of claiming material support from the people among whom they worked, Paul and Barnabas sought their own livelihood in order to promote the gospel of Christ. This brings in some flexibility among the ordained ministers.<sup>39</sup>

There is no foundation in the New Testament for separating the elders or the ordained ministers to a more exalted position in the society. For example, Jesus lived

---

<sup>37</sup> Cf. A. NICHOLS, *Holy Order*, 34f.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. J. T. FORESTELL, *As Ministers of Christ*, 130.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. J. T. FORESTELL, *As Ministers of Christ*, 130f.

among the people he served. The clerical state developed in the church under the influence of Old Testament patterns of cultic priesthood and of the stratification of Roman society.<sup>40</sup>

In the First letter to Timothy, we read, “do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterances when the council of elders laid hands upon you” (4:14). This sounds like an act of ordination. The laying of hands is an important aspect of conferring someone with ministry. We saw this aspect in the Old Testament when Moses presided over the ordination of Aaron.

It was a general custom in the New Testament era. In some situations people were chosen for a special task by the laying on of hands.<sup>41</sup> Ordination was not linked to Eucharistic presidency. This is because in the New Testament:

...ministry does not organise itself around the liturgy but around building up the community's life...The fundamental purpose of ministry, as the New Testament understands it, is to preserve the community's self-identity as the community of Jesus, to help it discover the gospel amid the changing circumstances of its life.<sup>42</sup>

We have several passages in the New Testament that indicate a laying on of hands, like Acts 6:6; 8:17; 13:3; 19:6 but none could be linked with ordination per se. Therefore we could conclude that the question of ordination did not exist in the New Testament. Thus, it would be worthwhile to look at how the early Christian communities recognized elders and how those elders gained authoritative status through their ministerial services.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Cf. J. T. FORESTELL, *As Ministers of Christ*, 131f.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 167.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 167.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 166.

#### 1.4 Elderhood in Early Christian Community

It is most probable that there was no liturgy in early Christianity and thus the idea of priest to preside over the Eucharist was not necessary. The early Christians avoided the term priest but put their emphasis in building up of communities by elders.<sup>44</sup> By the beginning of third century, the offices of bishop, presbyter and deacon were pronounced and it was evident that some form of election, together with a ritual of ordination that included prayer and the laying on of hands, took place.<sup>45</sup>

The bishop had the task of offering the community's gift to God by offering sacrifices.<sup>46</sup> The presbyters were held in high esteem and are compared to the council of apostles. They were a college of ministers superior in authority to the deacons but inferior to the bishop. They were esteemed not because they had a ministry or a job to do but because their lives revealed a deep maturity in faith. Theirs, as we saw earlier, was a title of status rather than of ministerial function.<sup>47</sup>

During the time of Cyprian of Carthage, the presbyters began to be seen as priests representing the bishops in Eucharistic services of various communities.<sup>48</sup> By the fourth century, bishops and presbyters were understood as priests because they presided at the sacramental representation of Christ's sacrificial death. Jewish and pagan concepts of cultic priesthood were transferred to the elders of the Christian community to include preaching the gospel, instructing people and forming the community.<sup>49</sup>

We see here that the community of early Christians categorized their elders into three categories. It was a development from Jesus' twelve disciples to a more

---

<sup>44</sup> Cf. W. J. BAUSCH, *Ministry*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 171

<sup>46</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 179

<sup>47</sup> Cf. N. MITCHELL, *Mission and Ministry*, 179ff

<sup>48</sup> Cf. D. N. POWER, *Ministers of Christ and His Church*, 45ff.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. J. T. FORESTELL, *As Ministers of Christ*, 133

structured way of leadership and overseeing of a community of faith. Ordination is the culmination of a community's trust in someone. One assumed the roles of preaching, instructing and forming a community.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen in this chapter that elders were present from the Old Testament era but they were not as institutionalised as we have them now. We looked at elders like Moses and David who had within their circles other elders that helped them in some functions like instructing and reconciling the community. We moved to the New Testament where we acknowledged the elderhood of Jesus Christ and his choice of twelve apostles to carry forth his work. We too encountered Paul who as an elder worked with other elders of other local churches. From there we looked at ordination in the New Testament where we discovered the act of laying on of hands. From there we looked at elderhood in the early Christian community. We came to the conclusion that by the Fourth century elders were presiding at the sacramental representation of Christ's sacrificial death. We noted too that the offices of bishops, priests and deacons were much developed. We will now turn to chapter two where we will see how the traditional Agikuyu people chose and instituted their elders and the role bestowed in those who were honoured as elders.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ELDERHOOD IN AGIKUYU COMMUNITY

#### Introduction

In this chapter we are going to see how an elder came about among the Agikuyu people. We will start with who the Agikuyu people are and where they are found. We will discover that first and foremost Agikuyu people believe in God from whom they came. From there we will trace the making of an elder from the naming rite to marriage. We will go ahead to see the choice of an elder and their categories. Then we will look at their traditional roles and check whether they experienced some conflict and constraints.

#### 2.1 Origin and Myth

Agikuyu people are the largest Bantu ethnic group in Kenya. Their land of origin comprises of the Southern and Eastern slope of *Kirinyaga* (Mt Kenya), that is, Kiambu, Muranga and Nyeri districts.<sup>50</sup> Agikuyu people believe that God created a man called *Gikuyu* and gave him a wife called *Mumbi*. *Gikuyu* and *Mumbi* gave birth to nine daughters and God provided them with nine handsome men and together they formed the nine clans of Agikuyu.<sup>51</sup> The original offspring were women hence the

---

<sup>50</sup> Cf. F. WAMBURU, *On Going Formation for Diocesan Priests*, 15.

<sup>51</sup> The Agikuyu people did not count people. They used a number 'nine full' instead of number ten. Thus we can say that there were ten daughters and ten young men.

clans are called according to their names. Thus the Agikuyu clans were maternal in nature. It changed along the way to be patrilineal as men fought against women dominance.<sup>52</sup>

## 2.2 Rites of Passage

The process of becoming an elder<sup>53</sup> began with a naming ritual.<sup>54</sup> This was done immediately after birth in consultation with the husband. This act was significant because it elevated a young man into the status of a father.<sup>55</sup> When a boy attained the age of puberty the circumcision ritual followed. This rite signified incorporation into one's own community. The rite of circumcision was for both boys and girls but done separately. It was normally done during the season when the weather was good and there was plenty to eat.<sup>56</sup>

The next rite that was so crucial for one to become an elder was marriage. After marriage a young man was promoted to a grade between that of a young man and an elder.<sup>57</sup> The Agikuyu waited to prove the fecundity of a young married man in begetting children before accepting him into adulthood. In child bearing the elders were ensured of the perpetuation of the young man's clan. It is through one's children that one acquired elderhood status.

---

<sup>52</sup> There was a story of a woman leader called Wangu wa Makeri who oppressed men in her capacity but the men overturned her during her pregnancy period and never again allowed a woman to rise to that position.

<sup>53</sup> This term in the Agikuyu people is reserved for men especially those who have married. Thus, the Agikuyu people call an elder 'muthuuri' or the one who has chosen a woman.

<sup>54</sup> Some people say that it began at conception.

<sup>55</sup> The firstborn boy was named after the father of his father for the continuation of the patrilineal genealogy.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ our Muthamaki*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ our Muthamaki*, 23.

### 2.3 Elderhood

Marriage and the gift of children was the gateway to the elderhood status. This is because marriage gave one the privilege to manage a family. The honour or the status came with how well one managed his family. It is in a family setup that one showed how well he has integrated his life experience and socialization. He exhibited in his words and actions that he had learnt from the elders and was ready to work with them for the welfare of the whole community. He continued to learn and grow in experience and wisdom. He was accepted in the council of elders or *Kiama* after he was found worthy to take part in the decision making of his people. Thus, he became one of the elders (*Athamaki*) that governed and presided over practically everybody and everyone.<sup>58</sup> It is to be noted that none was superior to the others but all the elders were of equal status. The elders in a particular council of elders chose one or two to head them.

“Agikuyu elders were composed of men of good character.”<sup>59</sup> Men who listened attentively, kept secrets and made decisions amicably. They were chosen by the community and approved by the council of elders. The elder was a family man who manifested exceptional leadership qualities. Most of them were in polygamous families and therefore worked hard to bring their wives and children together.

In Agikuyu mindset, a husband was first an elder in his home, no matter how young he was. The Agikuyu have a proverb that “*mucii dwathanagwo ni utawakire*,”<sup>60</sup> that is, the house is not ruled by him that did not build it. This means that a young and inexperienced person could learn from his own experience and gain

---

<sup>58</sup> Cf. P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ our Muthamaki*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> M. MURIU, P. GICHUHI, elderly men in Chesire home Kariobangi, Interview by the author, personal notes, 30 May 2009, Nairobi.

<sup>60</sup> G. BARRA, *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs*, 53.

wisdom. In other words you cannot place the head of a young person on the shoulders of an old man. The Agikuyu elders allowed everyone to learn and mature on their own time.

## 2.4 Categories of Elders

There were four categories of elders with distinct roles. The first category is for those in charge of security '*kia matimu*'. These were recognized as the spear holders. That is what '*kia matimu*' means. It was the rank of a man who just married. The second were the peacemakers '*kia mataathi*'.<sup>61</sup> This group of elders had a special flywhisk made of special leaves called '*mataathi*'. The third group was known as senior *mataathi*. A man qualified to join this category after the circumcision of the man's first child.

The fourth group of elders was the religious leaders '*maturanguru*,' the highest grade one could achieve. This was an honour in a man's life and was reached at an old age. Wamburu, is quick to note, "being in *kiama kia Maturanguru* did not automatically qualify one to join in offering sacrifices. Among those who did were those believed to have been endowed with some powers that were beyond those other ordinary human beings?"<sup>62</sup> They were the men who were spotless and could not move about with women nor misbehave in the community. Thus they were the old '*wazee*' in the village.<sup>63</sup> To belong to this group one was supposed to be honest and spotless. One was called to mediate the community with God. We are going to see in chapter three that priests are acknowledged as elders in this category.

---

<sup>61</sup> *Mataathi* are leaves that are soft and can be tied together to make something like a flywhisk. In the Agikuyu world these bundle of leaves symbolized peace. It is like when people are demonstrating with green branches to symbolize peaceful demonstration.

<sup>62</sup> F. WAMBURU, *On Going Formation for Diocesan Priests*, 21ff

<sup>63</sup> G. MBURU, a resident of Kariobangi North and was a member of *Maturanguru*, Interview by the author, personal notes, 30 May 2009, Nairobi.

From the categories of Agikuyu elders, three needs emerged that the Agikuyu people tried to address. These are security, peace and oneness with God. For any community to develop it must cater for these needs in order to bring about harmony. The bible in Micah says that “what he (Lord) requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love and to live in humble fellowship with our God” (6:8). The Agikuyu community had seen the importance of these values and hence promoted elderhood based on those needs.

Nowadays women are included in making decisions that affect the community. Traditionally, women were not part of any ‘*kiama*’. They had their own parallel formation of elders that resembled that of men. After marriage, a girl joined the group of women called ‘*kang’ei*’. This was a group of women that could be compared with worker bees. “These were the group of women who took food in the forest to the freedom fighters. They took care of the community in food and other services that befitted them.”<sup>64</sup>

The next group was the ‘*Nyakinyua*’. A woman joined this group after her first child was circumcised. This group “entertained the community with songs and commanded the ‘*kang’ei*’ on whatever needed to be done.”<sup>65</sup> Women were elders in early church and suffice it to say here that in Pauline letters we encounter women that helped in the work of evangelisation.

The importance of women nowadays for development cannot be underestimated. Agikuyu women played a vital role in providing food for the community. We know that women are the carriers of family and traditional values.

---

<sup>64</sup> P. WANJIRU, an elderly woman at the Chesire Home Kariobangi, Interview by the author, personal notes, 06 June 2009, Nairobi.

<sup>65</sup> P. WANJIRU, Interview by the author, personal notes, 06 June 2009, Nairobi.

They are heavily involved in food production and must be accorded the rightful place in Society.

## 2.5 Historical Roles of Elders

Mkenda remarks that Christianity and Western forms of education replaced the role the Agikuyu elders had on issues of morality and religion. Morality and religion have been taken by figures such as pastors, priests, teachers and chiefs who merit those positions out of academic qualification.<sup>66</sup> They take their authority from legislative and juridical backing.<sup>67</sup> However, many writers agree that Agikuyu elders must have undergone all the Gikuyu rituals of naming, circumcision, marriage,<sup>68</sup> before being considered among what Wamburu, calls 'senior council of elders.'<sup>69</sup> This was made by the experienced elder and the exercise of it advanced their sense of justice and service to their people.

The elders were '*atungati*' or servants of the people. They played the role of reconciling people and united people among themselves and with God. As servants they were people who could be sent and summoned anywhere and anytime. They were protectors of the society and were quick to defend people against an enemy. As a team, they educated and enlightened people on the Agikuyu way of life. They helped to settle disputes and defended the weak ones from exploitation. They mediated in matters of irresponsible pregnancies which were rare due to penalty and moral life of the Agikuyu. They also offered sacrifices to God and cleansed people from '*thahu*' or sin. Thus, the historical role of elders, says Wachege, embraced all types of services

---

<sup>66</sup> Cf. E. MKENDA, *The Role of Elders in Moral Formation*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. E. MKENDA, *The Role of Elders in Moral Formation*, 144.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ Our Muthamaki*, 25.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. F. WAMBURU, *On Going Formation for Diocesan Priests*, 21.

except those that were reserved for the women.<sup>70</sup> “It is from the elders that diviners, healers, ministers of sacrifices and other religious men were appointed and trained for the sake of community especially in matters relating to communion with *Ngai* (God) and ancestors.”<sup>71</sup>

The council of elders ‘*kiama*’ worked in secret and consulted each other before making any decision. They prayed to God in times of crisis and their prayer was answered almost immediately. This is because they were spotless, that is, without sin or ‘*thahu*’. “The elders had a special stick ‘*muthigi*’ that they used in performing special duties. They put the sticks together whenever a common blessing was bestowed or curse.”<sup>72</sup>

Wachege says, “while some people enter into *kiama* voluntarily and at their convenience, others with appealing qualities were pressurized by elders to join them in *kiama* even in their youthful stage.”<sup>73</sup> This was done after through scrutiny and consultation among the members of *kiama*. The youthful stage that Wachege refers to could be what Kenyatta says “...from the age of thirty and above” one was legible of being in *Kiama*.<sup>74</sup>

Their role was to settle disputes. These were dispute that arose from interpersonal relationship. In case of rape and unwanted pregnancies, the community paid damages. Murder was very serious and resulted in banishment. “Rape, adultery,

---

<sup>70</sup> Cf. P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ Our Muthamaki*, 31f.

<sup>71</sup> J. KARIUKI, Philosophy Lecturer at Tangaza, interview by the author, Personal notes, 20 October, 2009.

<sup>72</sup> M. MURIU, P. GICHUHI, Interview by the author, personal notes, 30 May 2009, Nairobi.

<sup>73</sup> P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ Our Muthamaki*, 25.

<sup>74</sup> J. KENYATTA, *Facing Mount Kenya*, 195.

fornication and murder resulted in impediments and barred someone from joining the council of elders.”<sup>75</sup>

Magesa says that the person who is willing to teach, counsel and guide people morally qualifies to be a leader. This is a person in whom people find consolation. His obligation is to do what is in his powers to protect and prolong the life of the family and the community. He is a person of a “cool heart” not “hot-headed.” Thus, maturity, thoughtfulness, patience, understanding, and wisdom are required of him. He is also a person who advises and gives directions of worship to people.<sup>76</sup>

Elders were not allowed to mingle freely with other age groups. They had to avoid over familiarity to safeguard their good morals. They were also required to keep handing-over their powers from generation to generation. This could be seen in the light of apostolic tradition. They believed that their power came from God and one needed to hand it over to the next generation. This is how we have come up with clans that specialise in one role. For example, “the *Irungus* were known as the experts in the sacrificial and religious field.”<sup>77</sup> It is almost the same thing as we found in chapter one with the Aaronic priesthood.

The elders made sure that the needy were helped. Food was not to be denied to anyone. “Where there was a bride price paid, some of the wealth was distributed to the uncles and others who were concerned.”<sup>78</sup> It is the responsibility of an elder to be generous and to source some help for the needy.

---

<sup>75</sup> G. MBURU, Interview by the author, personal notes, 30 May 2009, Nairobi.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. L. MAGESA, *African Religion*, 68f.

<sup>77</sup> Fr NJOROGE, a lecturer in St Thomas Aquinas Seminary Nairobi, Interview by the author, personal notes, 22 September, 2009, Nairobi.

<sup>78</sup> G. MBURU, Interview by the author, personal notes, 30 May 2009, Nairobi.

The contemporary role of an elder is best captured by Harold F Miller in an occasional paper '*Kikuyu Elderhood as an Oracle.*' He reported an interview he had with Kinuthia Mugia in these words:

...he is a parent of married children; he is an active church member; he presents a speech at least once per week on Kenyan radio, explaining the intricacies of the Kikuyu language and culture, ...he is a writer of Kikuyu history, proverbs and riddles; he is a member of the local community council which attends to matters of security and settles disputes; he serves as a part of the memory of Mau Mau detention, and the Kikuyu Central Association.<sup>79</sup>

Thus the modern elder is more educated than the traditional one. The elder described above stands in the interface between the old and the new. He is a person of good character and fit to be a leader and an elder.

## 2.6 Constraints and Conflicts of Roles

The powers of elders were not absolute. No one enjoyed impunity. Whenever an elder misbehaved, the other elders tried him and passed sentence depending on his misconduct like anybody else. Sometime he was dealt with ruthlessly since he was more informed than the others who are not in *kiama*. The elder had no power to hear cases by himself but had to do so in union and collaboration with the others to avoid bias and prejudice. Moreover, he could not enter another's case uninvited.<sup>80</sup>

An elder who impregnated an unmarried woman other than their lawful wives, took an oath to confess or deny the act that was called '*kuringithio thenge*'.<sup>81</sup> The oath was so abiding that the one involved had to state his case clearly. If the truth was established contrary to the one professed, one faced a severe penalty which included

---

<sup>79</sup> F. MILLER, *Exploring the Wisdom of Africa*, 9.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ Our Muthamaki*, 43.

<sup>81</sup> This would mean giving a ram and slaughtering it in the presence of the Council of Elders dividing it in different parts, *maringa*, in the Agikuyu way. MAINA (Interview) 01 June 2009.

banishment or death. This is evident that death penalty was present in Agikuyu traditional religion.

In case an elder revealed the secret of the '*kiama*,' he faced severe judgment. He ceased to become a member of *kiama* anymore. Sometime it meant death because he had taken an oath of secrecy. Some of the words used for an oath were "*oruthurwo ni Nyama ino ungikaibura*" (may this meat hate you if you reveal).<sup>82</sup> This role fits well with the sacrament of confession. The Agikuyu people equate confession with '*gutahikithio*' (which literally means being helped to vomit). This meant that one was supposed to give truthful testimony lest the consequences. Thus, "the Agikuyu elders taught their children to be truthful and honest from the beginning."<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

An elder was a servant of the people. He was a community person not an individual. As a leader, he had to give his time and energy to develop community in his status. He was required to work in the team and never in isolation. Above all he is a man of integrity, one who manifests high levels of maturity. This is what Catholic priests who have been made elders should aim to promote. Their first family is the community in which they find themselves and then the parish or the area of their administration. This is the community that can bear witness that in deed our priest is a man of integrity!

---

<sup>82</sup> P. WANJIRU, Interview by the author, personal notes, 06 June 2009, Nairobi.

<sup>83</sup> G. MBURU, Interview by the author, personal notes, 30 May 2009, Nairobi. It means the human flesh will reject you for revealing the secret.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE CATHOLIC PRIEST AS AN AFRICAN ELDER

#### Introduction

We are going to use the experience of the Agikuyu elderhood to move into this chapter on the “Catholic Priest as an African Elder.” In this regard, therefore, we are going to start defining who is a priest and then situate a Christology the Ideal Elder. From there we shall look at the African setting today in which priests are made African elders. It is then that we shall look at the council of elders that a priest joins by virtue of ordination. Finally, we will delve into the Agikuyu rites of institution, the shorter form and the longer one.

#### 3.1 The Priest

A priest is a person who functions officially to establish or preserve contact between the superhuman world and human community. Because of his mediating function he has a leading part in ritual, guarding and preserving knowledge of the religious tradition. The presence of a priest in a community implies and presupposes there is some social and political organization, cultural and religious differentiation and an elaborate cultic life centering in the sacrifice.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> K. W. BOLLE, *Priest and Priesthood*, .

Priesthood is for the sake of a community and the church's mission in the world. Priesthood stems from Christ through the apostles to the bishops today. According to Catholic teaching, the priest's function is both sacrificial and pastoral. He has a twofold function of a sacramental expression of Christ's unique oblation and that of preaching and shepherding. He models his life in the life and teaching of Christ.<sup>85</sup>

Ministry to any community is affected by the social and political changes of the people and more so to the changes that occur within the church.<sup>86</sup> However, the ministry of priesthood should be discerned in the light of Jesus' ministry. God calls a person into ministry and the community ratifies this call. The community indeed plays a role in selecting a worthy person. We saw in Chapter One that the community played a role in choosing a presbyter, elder. Bishop Ndingi advised that "No candidate should be accepted for priestly formation in the major seminary, unless the Parish Pastoral Council has been consulted, and has given consent."<sup>87</sup>

This does not downplay in any way the calling and commissioning from God. It acknowledges the voice of the people who are elected to act on behalf of the community. The Christian communities elect them for their leadership qualities and entrust them with elderhood roles. God acts through people hence the reason to seek for their approval. God is the author of all vocations and every elder is to acknowledge this fact with awe. One is called by God to serve the community in which he finds oneself in love.<sup>88</sup> A calling into priesthood/elderhood is a call to serve.

---

<sup>85</sup> Cf. B. HINWOOD, *The priest: a Functional Discription*, 166ff.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. G. WAMBURU, *On Going Formation for Diocesan Priests*, 43.

<sup>87</sup> R. NDINGI, *Vocation and Formation of Priests*, 23.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. G. WAMBURU, *On Going Formation for Diocesan Priests*, 47.

Priesthood and leadership have always been linked with services offered to a community. A priest is respected because he is specially chosen and ordained to offer sacrifice and leadership in the community. No matter how young he is, he possesses a unique character that is acknowledged and respected by the community. The Code of Canon Law says that “priesthood may be conferred only on those who have completed their twenty-fifth years of age, and possesses a sufficient maturity...” (CCL 1031) In the Agikuyu community, a young man of twenty-four is already mature for marriage and is allowed to sit among the elders.

Wamburu remarks about young diocesan priests that despite their youthful stage at ordination, they become elders in the community. Ordination into priesthood fits them into the junior grade of an elder. However, since diocesan priests offer sacrifice, ordination helps them to skip all the lower grades to reach a senior grade of an elder, that is, the fourth grade. “Humanly speaking, it is not possible” but Christianity enables them.<sup>89</sup>

A priest as a minister is a servant and makes a public commitment for the purpose of offering sacrifice. In this capacity, he ceases to become a private individual but a public person. He is called to die to self for the sake of Christ. He gives himself to the people in his generosity. In the Letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is presented as a model to those who minister as priests. Jesus offered the perfect sacrifice once and for all (10:14) and continues to do so in heaven.<sup>90</sup> Let us therefore look at the elderhood of Jesus.

---

<sup>89</sup> G. WAMBURU, *On Going Formation for Diocesan Priests*, 23-24.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. G. WAMBURU, *On Going Formation for Diocesan Priests*, 48f.

### 3.2 Jesus the Ideal Elder

Unfortunately, there is nowhere in the Bible where Jesus is referred to as an elder. We have to infer from other titles such as shepherd which are closely linked with the qualities of an elder. The notion of Agikuyu elderhood seems to be broader than the New Testament usage of it. Most likely the author of the New Testament intentionally avoided the term elder because the elders of their time did not live up to their expectation and dignity.<sup>91</sup>

Priests in Africa are called to take the role of shepherds of God's people. As shepherds, priests ought to realize the need to acquire holiness by performing their pastoral duties sincerely and tirelessly in the spirit of love and service. Christ the Good Shepherd who mandated them to continue his mission in the world has given the standards for them to follow. Thus, the priest as shepherd is a sign of Christ, the High Priest and Good Shepherd *par-excellence*.<sup>92</sup>

The name elder signifies a senior man, but it also connotes a man of authority, no matter what his age. It is a position of honour and authority. According to New Testament usage, presbyters were dignified, mature officials of the Church. We can argue that Jesus was the elder because he signified authority. His authority stunned people in his teaching and moral standards. He started as an activist or in the Agikuyu setting, *kia matimu*,<sup>93</sup> those who defended the people. He rapidly qualified to be a peacemaker or *kia mataathi*<sup>94</sup> in his relations with people. Eventually he joined the

---

<sup>91</sup> Cf. P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ Our Muthamaki*, 116f.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. P. MALITI, *Priesthood: A Call to Imitate Christ*, 87ff.

<sup>93</sup> The junior grade in the Agikuyu elderhood that is associated with defense due to the young and energetic age of the elder.

<sup>94</sup> At this stage one is experienced in life and it is presumed that one has undergone the challenges of life and therefore could use one's experience to reconcile people. It is said that experience is the best teacher.

category of *maturanguru*<sup>95</sup> in offering sacrifice to God and ultimately dying on the cross. He qualified in the Agikuyu community as a *Mwathi/Muthamaki* or a great ruler. In this way, no matter how young Jesus was, he was an elder.

The qualities or characteristics the Agikuyu people affirmed in an elder were all embraced by Jesus. He was rooted in a family, that is, he was born from a legitimate family. He underwent initiation rites especially those of childhood and circumcision. He began his fruitful ministry when the Agikuyu would have expected him to prove his fecundity in marriage. Secondly he was a man of God. In this way he proved to be a person of faith demonstrated in prayer, sacrifices, blessing and curses, and cleansings that he did. Apart from that, he was a servant, peacemaker, leader and ruler and a person of interpersonal relationship. Thirdly, he was in a position of power because he managed to influence the community positively.<sup>96</sup> In this way he was an integrated man and people saw in him leadership qualities and recognized his great potential. It is these qualities that make us to identify Jesus as the Ideal Elder. Although Jesus did not prove his fecundity in marriage as the Agikuyu people expected, he in his own way brought life to many who sought refuge in Him. This way his fecundity was seen.

An African priest has to learn to establish from Jesus qualities that could help him in his pastoral, relational and existential participation in which that he finds himself. He should be in a position to trust in the providence of God like Jesus the Good Shepherd. His witness should be modelled on the presence, availability, initiative, commitment and the prayer of Christ.<sup>97</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> This is the stage of those who are allowed to offer sacrifices on behalf of the Agikuyu community. It is only a few who qualify to be in this group. It is highly respected.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ Our Muthamaki*, 117.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. P. MALITI, *Priesthood: A Call to Imitate Christ*, 92.

### 3.3 African Setting

In the Agikuyu worldview, religion was intertwined with the daily lives of the people. Moral formation became stricter during initiation rites of passage. This is where an elder began to emerge. The values that one inculcated during this time made one a possible candidate. The aim of moral formation was to make someone loving, respectful, faithful, generous, hardworking, caring, hospitable, kind and mindful of the environment. These moral values were learnt through families, elders and peers. The family is seen as the centre of learning followed by the elders.<sup>98</sup> Thus marriage was highly valued and elders made sure everyone remained faithful to his family.

The coming of Christian missionaries in Kenya affected traditional performance of the rite of passage among the Agikuyu people. It affected traditional Agikuyu elderhood in moral formation. The Agikuyu rites were replaced by new ones such as baptism, confirmation and Christian marriage. One of the stunning Christian rites of passage is that one of ordination. Young men were educated and set apart to fulfill religious functions. This was unlike the Agikuyu customs where they chose some of the elders, especially those who were advanced in years, to fulfill their religious needs. This brought some tension between the two cultures. The new one took root rapidly. Consequently, the Agikuyu people who converted to Christianity started to ignore their rituals and ceremonies.

The Agikuyu elders started to be replaced by modern educators and Christian leaders who were chosen because of their academic qualification rather than the traditional values advocated by the Agikuyu people. Since it was young people who

---

<sup>98</sup>Cf. E. MKENDA, *The Role of Elders in Moral Formation*, 73ff.

got to position of power, the Agikuyu elderly men relaxed and felt disrespected. This led to a weakening of the Agikuyu elderhood. The priests worked on their own under specified structures with well defined job description. They concentrated more on religious formation thus losing sight of the Agikuyu worldview of a religious life intertwined with daily living.

### **3.4 Catholic Priest as an Agikuyu Elder**

Acknowledging a Catholic priest as an Agikuyu elder in an Agikuyu populated community is like going back to the sources of *mitugo na mikiire ya Agikuyu* (Agikuyu traditions and customs). This makes more sense now that the Agikuyu people are Christianized. Formally, there was doubt among the foreign missionary priests because they came almost the same time with colonizers. Thus the Agikuyu people had a saying *Gutiri muthungu na mubea* (there is no difference between colonizers and priests). They were looked on as traitors. African men who joined them were not readily accepted.

Foreign priests were accepted by the Agikuyu people after it was proved beyond reasonable doubt that they were for and with the people. Some foreign priests were accepted as Agikuyu elders. They were raised to the status of Agikuyu men who manifested integrity of life and held positions of power. They were raised to positions of honour and status befitting an elder. This could have been the advent of making catholic priests elders.

Formally, it was only elderly priests that were recognized as elders. These were priests who had served in the Agikuyu country for some years and had identified themselves with the people by learning the language and lifestyle. There were African priests who were raised to that status after serving as priest for several years. Agikuyu

people decided to honour those individuals by incorporating them in their council of elders. Today in those areas where it is a custom, almost all Agikuyu priests are made elders automatically at ordination.

### 3.5 Council of Elders

A Council of elders is a group of individuals with the same status of eldership, who confided in one another, governed and presided practically over everybody and everything. Men who were accepted in it were found worthy and were advised beforehand on how to conduct themselves in and outside the council of elders.<sup>99</sup>

When a priest today is made an elder, he joins a group of priests to form a council. This council is different from the traditional council of elders since it incorporates the Christian notion of those who have been set apart to offer religious sacrifices and prayers. An elder according to the Agikuyu people does not act alone. He acts in consultation with others. Thus, there is a council of elders to preside over cases that threatens the peace of the people. The priest as an elder should know that it is his responsibility to involve his council members to restore social order on behalf of people and use religion and social sanctions to bring moral stability in the community.

In times of misfortune or illness in the community, elders were responsible to perform acts of purification, what one of the interviewee called '*gutahikitathio*'<sup>100</sup> that is equivalent to confession. One of the elder was appointed to summon a diviner who helped the affected people to free themselves of any ill motives and other malicious thoughts that brought about illness in the community.

---

<sup>99</sup> Cf. P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ Our Muthamaki*, 25f.

<sup>100</sup> Fr NJOROGE, Interview by the author, personal notes, 22 September, 2009, Nairobi. The term *Gutahikithio* is an act of 'compelling someone to vomit' (literal meaning) out the evil deeds and intentions in order to be relieved of malicious burdens. It is like confession in the Catholic Church.

### 3.6 Rite of Institution into Agikuyu Elderhood

When an ordinary person was being instituted into the council of elders, he underwent some scrutiny to make sure that he had undergone all the rituals and practices right from birth. He was also checked as to whether he had fulfilled all the requirements that pertained to his category of elder. The most important ones were circumcision and marriage. After everything was in place, he was summoned and invited to his installation ceremony.<sup>101</sup> He was presented with an *elder's staff*. He was given a *bundle of leaves* that signified peace and reconciliation of the people he will be ministering. The other members of the council of elders placed their elder's staff down as in oath taking. One of them said loudly, "an elder who uses his elder's staff corruptly let him die" and all responded "let him die." They later blessed the new person before they ate together.<sup>102</sup>

Among the recent developments is incorporating newly ordained in the status of elderhood. This is done by an elderly priest or a designated elderly person during the day of priestly ordination, within mass where the bishop agrees or during the first mass.<sup>103</sup> What is emphasized here is the role of prayer that one is going to perform in his elderly status.

One is introduced on how to pray as the Agikuyu forefathers used to pray using the formula of - *Thaai thathaiya Ngai thaai* (we beseech you Ngai/God we beseech you).<sup>104</sup> One's life after this introductory initiation either confirms one's reputation as an elder or tarnishes it. In the actual institution, a priest who is an elder

---

<sup>101</sup> Canon law states that before anyone may be promoted to the diaconate, whether permanent or transitory, he must have received the ministries of lector and acolyte, and have experienced them for an appropriate time CCL 1035.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ Our Muthamaki*, 26-27.

<sup>103</sup> Fr NJOROGE, Interview by the author, personal notes, 22 September, 2009, Nairobi.

<sup>104</sup> This is a typical Agikuyu invocation that is used even today. It was said traditionally facing Mt Kenya where *Ngai* was believed to reside.

puts on his Agikuyu *Githii* or an overdress from a colobus monkey's/cow's hide. He also puts on a *cap* made of sheep's skin, holds a *flywhisk* as a sign of peace and recites traditional Agikuyu prayers. The newly ordained is vested in those attires and asked to recite the prayer using the Agikuyu traditional way.<sup>105</sup> This highlights the fact that he is assuming a role of praying over the people from that day onwards.

There is another rite of institution that is more thorough. The chosen person is invited in a public place. He is clad with elderhood attires and asked to sit on a three legged stool (*Jung'wa*) where he receives the paraphernalia that an elder requires. These are: *muthigi* (special stick) signifying the power to lead; *Rwenji* (circumciser's knife) - power to circumcise; *Kioho kia migathi* (stringed beads) – power to choose beauty; *ruhio* (panga/machete) – power to slaughter a goat; *coro* (blowing horn) – power to rally people together; *itimu na ruhio rwa njora* (spear and sword) – power to call his people to war especially to defend the community.<sup>106</sup>

When a priest is instituted in this way he is given more responsibilities other than praying for the people. He becomes an elder of equal status or maybe higher with his traditional counterparts. He can be allowed in marriage negotiations something that is only reserved for those who qualify as traditional elders.

---

<sup>105</sup> M. WANJHIA, A religious sister from Nakuru, Interview by the author, personal notes, 21 September, 2009, Nairobi.

<sup>106</sup> This was found in the website of one vernacular radio station, Muigwithania 2.0, on 09/06/09.

## Conclusion

Experiences in different parts of the world have shown that a new pattern of priestly ministry develops when small, or basic, Christian communities become the focal point of Church renewal. It is clear that in every age, the role of a priest is transformed and a mark is left in the ministerial structures of the Church. However, very little will be achieved by ceremonies however beautiful they are, if they are not directed towards educating people to reach freedom and maturity.<sup>107</sup> Thus, this chapter sought to harmonize Christianity with traditional Agikuyu culture.

---

<sup>107</sup> Cf. B. HEARNE, *Priestly ministry and Christian Community*, 222ff.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

The Church has had its moments of growth over the years. However, some growth has been more conspicuous than others, but all had their small beginnings. In this work we have traced the elderhood of individual persons and groups in the history of Christianity. We began with the Bible then looked at the Agikuyu community and later brought the two together in an African priest. Now we shall consider the challenges and importance of making priests African elders today and then offer the way forward.

#### 4.1 Importance of making priests African Elders today

A priest primarily performs religious functions. He is the one suitable in carrying out sacrifices, *Igongona*(singular) or *magongona* (plural), that were formally reserved for the few chosen men in Agikuyu community. Indeed the mass is known as sacrifice of the mass. The priest is more formally educated than the traditional elders were and can at present include what was done in ignorance to include the revealed Truth that Christianity offers. The wisdom of the Agikuyu people revealed that '*Igongona ritirutagwo ni kihii*'<sup>108</sup> meaning that sacrifice is not performed by an

---

<sup>108</sup> Fr NJOROGÉ, (interview) 22 September, 2009.

uncircumcised boy or an immature person.<sup>109</sup> Robert P. Maloney gives a synthesis of Karl Rahner on the contemporary ministerial priesthood as follows:

The primary role of the priest is to proclaim the effective word that forms and sustains the Christian community. He shares in the mission of Christ, who is sent by the Father to proclaim God's kingdom. The priest is therefore, a servant of the kingdom and of the Church as a sign of that kingdom. A culminating moment in his ministry is the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, where the priest efficaciously proclaims, "This is my body....This is my blood," and the Lord himself is really present in sacramental form to nourish and strengthen his people.<sup>110</sup>

A priest in many ways today acts like a judge. He has to discern between right and wrong and act accordingly. This is especially so when he is dealing with cases of disputes. He is looked upon as the one who could decipher the truth and reunite the people according to his wisdom. A priest is a promoter of peace, reconciliation and harmony.

An elder according to the Agikuyu people does not act alone. He acts in consultation with others. Thus there is a council of elders. When priests are ordained they join a body of priests under a bishop or a superior. The Agikuyu priest errs when he acts alone in weighty matters that demand consultation. It is recommended that they consult not only their priest colleague but also the elders in the village. Priests are supposed to draw wisdom from all sources so that they can make sound decisions for the betterment of the community in which they work. This is very important in an African setting since community is valued greatly.

In the Agikuyu world, worship and sacrifice is not new, but priesthood is. Priests are people who are set apart and this agrees with the customs and traditions of

---

<sup>109</sup> *Kihii* or uncircumcised boy was not respected in the Agikuyu traditions. Most boys are seen as naughty and did stupid things because they were immature. Some of them stole meat meant for sacrifice and whenever this happened, it was believed that the sacrifice was not accepted by God. If the elders came to know about this, they secretly offered the sacrifice again. The term *kihii* is also used in a derogatory manner for those who are immature and unreasonable.

<sup>110</sup> R. P. MALONEY, *Vincentian Priesthood as Missionary*, 3.

the Agikuyu. In the absence of worthy people among the Agikuyus who can perform sacrifices and conduct people to pray and worship, priests now-a-days fit well in that role in a Christianized Agikuyu people. Priests stand in that position as symbols of transition from the old way of the Agikuyu group of elder that were known as *maturanguru* (those who offered sacrifices on behalf of people) and modern day liturgical actions that are somehow foreign but accepted by the people.

Due to modernity the elderhood of the Agikuyu people came somehow to a standstill. It is now evident, especially in Agikuyu dominated areas, that there is a lacuna that needs to be filled. In terms of religious fulfilment, the priest is playing a role to fill that gap. He collaborates with other people of good will to better a community in which he find himself. In addition, he fulfills the religious function of offering sacrifice in the form of the Holy Mass.

#### **4.2 Challenges of Making Priests as Elders Today**

In Kenya we are facing a serious challenge of tribalism. Making a priest an elder in a particular tribe could be seen as promoting tribalism. The Bible while accepting the identity of individuals and elders in particular communities challenges us to come out of our tribal cocoons. A priest is ordained for the Catholic Church which is universal. His role should be that of uniting others rather than dividing. Making a priest an elder in a particular ethnic community in a multicultural community poses serious dangers of being owned and thus could create divisions like the one found in first Corinthians, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos." Or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ," (1: 12).

There is a challenge that the Agikuyu people are imitating the other communities in Kenya that have maintained their elders. The Agikuyu people have

strived to revive their elderhood in vain. The Agikuyu people do not have a group of elders like the Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin and other communities in Kenya. Trying to introduce a group of a few elders like is found in other communities will be bringing new concepts in to the Agikuyu community. This has been tried by politician and other influential people without much success. The work of a priest as an elder in the Agikuyu world is not very influential because he is working in a failed traditional body of elders apart from the Catholic Church's circles.<sup>111</sup>

The Church is experiencing scandals, especially sexual scandals, today in which African priests are not immune. This is a big challenge especially when priests are made elders in their young days. The Agikuyu people delayed making someone an elder until someone was old enough to join the group of those who offered sacrifice. They especially looked for one who was past child bearing stage and could not move about with women. This is because they associated the worthiness of their prayers and sacrifices with the worthiness of the minister or mediator.

Again, what happens when a priest who is made an elder leaves priesthood? Should he continue to be recognized as a religious elder? These are some of the issues that make some people to be reluctant in the issue of making African priests elders. There are situations that have happened in the church when senior people have disappointed the people who made them elders. People would say that so and so was made an elder but he left priesthood for marriage. They wake up to the reality that they probably made wrong choices something that the Agikuyu people are very cautious about. Thus, they prefer elevating the traditional people other than priests.

---

<sup>111</sup> Fr NJORGE, (interview) 22 September, 2009.

The traditional people have the advantage of long years of experience before being instituted in the council of elders. The chances of one messing up were so minimal especially in the category of those who offered sacrifices. “The lucky few who were elected were ‘holy’ old elders of integrity – not adulterous but peaceful, extremely humble, wise and possessing unquestionable concern for the common good.”<sup>112</sup>

Making a priest an elder is applicable to a priest working among their people. What about missionary priests? Should they also be recognized as elders who have been sent on mission? Unfortunately the Agikuyu people do not have the concept of missionary priest. Almost all the people who performed public prayers and sacrifices were localized. This is because the credibility of these men was vested in the community in which they stayed. This is why some foreigners have been made elders only because they were ratified by the community to be worthy.

#### **4.3 Recommendations**

Now it is important to note that the mission of Jesus to the apostles is still going on. The ‘apostles’ have not reached the end of the world yet. In this way, Christianity is still penetrating in various cultures in Africa. We can say that we have done well in the first phase of introducing Christianity but now we are faced with the challenge of going deeper to the customs and traditions of the people. Without this, there will always be the danger of syncretism.

Ordination in itself is a rite of institution into elderhood today but there might be a need of inculturating the rite of ordination to include some elements of African rite of institution. This might go a long way in avoiding a ‘second’ institution into

---

<sup>112</sup> Cf. P. N. WACHEGE, *Jesus Christ Our Muthamaki*, 28.

elderhood, since this 'second' institution happens as an appendix to ordination in the Catholic Church, it would be worthwhile to include some of these elements of the 'second' institution to satisfy the need that the local communities have in making a priest an elder after ordination.

In the rite of ordination of priests during the investiture, the newly ordained priest is vested with a stole and a chasuble.<sup>113</sup> In addition to these vestments, at the very least, in a priestly ordination among the Agikuyu community, the newly ordained could be vested with a traditional hat and the overdress (*githii*), and given a flywhisk as symbols of his authority in offering sacrifices, and bringing about peace and reconciliation in the community.<sup>114</sup>

The Catholic Bishops could give this issue some concrete thoughts to come up with a way of maintaining this tradition meaningfully. "Dressing someone only during ordination or first mass with African attire and proclaiming him an Agikuyu elder and putting that *Githii* in store is a bluff."<sup>115</sup> Why not use that dress occasionally in mass or Para-liturgical ceremonies? It looks like the adoration cop and could be used during benediction. Like the bishops use mitre during mass, priests could also use the hat during the sacrifice of the mass.

There is need for more research in this area to harmonize the rite of institution so that it may fit in multicultural communities. With research and catechesis Christians would be helped to know that a priest is not ordained to one particular community, thus, it might be possible to come up with a traditional form of institution

---

<sup>113</sup> Cf. PAUL VI, *The Roman Pontifical*, Ordination of Priests, 200.

<sup>114</sup> Refer to the appendix.

<sup>115</sup> J. KARIUKI, interview by the author, Personal notes, 20 October, 2009.

that represents the one Christian culture that joins us all together in a particular region.

For those who are leaving priesthood for various reasons like marriage, it should be left to them to decide what they want to do with the authority they got from the community at ordination. Although they cease carrying out official duties as priests in the Catholic Church, they could be of help to the community in their new status in community building. Those who go for marriage should keep in mind how the Agikuyu people held marriage in high esteem. From their knowledge and experience in priesthood and their experience in marriage, they stand a better chance of being peace makers and reconcilers in the community.

Young priest should be engaged in ongoing formation so as to become men of integrity and maturity in their elderly functions. The young men must be so trained that this particular situation which they at present experience may not only not lead them into any danger of spiritual collapse, but in fact stimulate them, with firm hope and faith in God to be good elders.<sup>116</sup> Their major function is that of offering sacrifice which is expected to be performed by one who is spotless in the eyes of the Agikuyu people. Young priests should therefore be helped to strive for spiritual and human maturity.

The elderhood of a young Gikuyu priest is aided by the fact that he acts in consultation with others. A priest as a modern elder has an additional value in that he is more exposed and educated than the traditional person who offered sacrifices. However, one should know that he is a learner and in need of God's guidance and

---

<sup>116</sup> Cf. CD-ROM Welcome to the Catholic Church, *Activity and Life of Priests Today*...

experience to be able to act as an elder. It is then that “people will seek counsel from them, ask them to help settle family disputes and reconciliation.”<sup>117</sup>

Maybe it is better for someone to be made an elder after some years of service. This might avoid some abuse of the institution of elderhood among the Agikuyu people. This might be the best approach since it is an avenue even to the missionary priests who are not Agikuyu but have lived among them and manifested the integrity required. Ordination in itself is not enough to for someone to become an elder. Maturity and integrity are the key entry among the Agikuyu people. In this way, a newly ordained priest will be a possible elder. However, because he is just newly ordained, he is like a newly married man who is entrusted with a family and experiences life, make mistakes and learn from them to gain maturity. It is after one has gained maturity and integrity of life the one should be honoured as an elder. This could happen in one’s silver jubilee or golden jubilee if not earlier than that. In this way, we will have “discovered anew the beauty and importance of the priesthood and of each priest”<sup>118</sup> in the local Church.

We should not be afraid of marrying the traditional values of the Agikuyu people with those of the Gospel. Instead we should aim at illuminating the former with the light of the Gospel while aiming at integrating what the people dearly holds in their lives to Christian living today. Responding to incorporation of priest as elders and acknowledging them as such within our present system will go a long way in inculturation. This will remove the risk of branding Christianity as a foreign culture.

---

<sup>117</sup> J. KARIUKI, interview by the author, Personal notes, 20 October, 2009.

<sup>118</sup> NJUE, J., “*The Gift of Priesthood and Celibacy*” 16<sup>th</sup> June, 2009.

## Conclusion

I concur with Brian Hearne in saying that, inculturation is an important element in the life of the Church and traditional values must be taken seriously. However, they must be evaluated in the light of the Gospel. There are certainly both positive and negative aspects of the exercise of authority in traditional Africa. In the attempts to “africanise” the forms of Church ministry, real discernment is required, especially keeping in mind the words of Jesus about secular authority: “Among you, it shall not be so.”<sup>119</sup>

---

<sup>119</sup> B. HEARNE, *Priestly ministry and Christian Community*, 229.

## GENERAL CONCLUSION

In Chapter One, we encountered the small beginnings of the tribe of Israel. We saw how priesthood developed into a recognizable class of priests. It is here that we encountered the young Levite who was employed to work as a priest in exchange for food, clothes, shelter and salary. We later looked at the priesthood of Elide, Zadok and Maccabean. We discovered that before the coming of Christ, the elders had devolved into a kind of senate. We went ahead to look at groups of elders in the New Testaments such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots. These were groups that were formed to address a particular need and thus offered different services in their communities. Jesus too selected certain disciples as his apostles. These were both young like James and John and older ones like Peter.

In the time of Paul we discovered that leadership began as a household affair. It developed into a council of elders in some communities. Later we saw that some elders were elevated to become bishops, presbyters and deacons. Such elders were honoured and people took them as their model because of their witness. We noted that these tasks developed into offices of elders that presided over the sacrifice of the Eucharist and assisting at it. These persons were ordained for the purpose of serving the communities in preaching, instructing and forming.

In Chapter Two, we majored on one ethnic community, the Agikuyu, to trace their elderhood. We discovered that their elders were composed of men of good

character who were chosen by the community and endorsed by the council of elders. These men were mostly married but we found that newly married young people with appealing qualities were also pressurized by elders to join in their council of elders. The elders who offered sacrifice were set apart and were not allowed to mingle freely with other age groups. This was to help them safeguard their good morals. Their role was so crucial because it involved the communication with the Divine. These were people that were highly trusted by the community and could not defile themselves lest they spoil the sacrifice they offered.

In Chapter Three, we defined who is a priest and his role in the contemporary society. We discovered that a priest is seen as an elder despite his youthful age at ordination because he offers sacrifice. We argued that Jesus was an elder because he signified authority in his teaching and morals. He qualified in the Agikuyu community as a *Mwathi/Muthamaki* - Ideal Elder. We found that the characteristic the Agikuyu people affirmed in an elder were embraced by Jesus.

Chapter Four addressed the importance and highlighted the challenges of making priests African elders today. What came out strongly is the role of offering sacrifice that is so central to a priest. Among other things, this is what qualifies a priest as an African elder despite some being youthful. The priest then joins other priests in a council of elders adding the communitarian dimension to his elderhood. There are several challenges that are stumbling blocks in this endeavour like tribalism and sexual scandals that taint the image of priests today.

Despite all these, we saw value in 'launching our nets to the deep' in making local priests as African elders. We sought to integrate in the rite of ordination vestments that were used in traditional African rites of elderhood. These are only

signs of their authority to incorporate the traditional way of worshipping in the reality of Christianity. Some of those vestments are made of skin/hide of animals that connects very well with the traditions of our ancestors who did not enjoy the fabrics we use today for our clothing.<sup>120</sup> However, we said in the attempt to 'Africanise', real discernment is required so as to be in line with the Traditions of the Church and the Gospel.

We are not making priests African elders for the sake of fulfilling physical ceremonies but out of love for the people. Love of our communities is the backbone of who we are. These are the communities that have formed us to who we are (refer chap. II) by their examples. We are set apart in ordination to serve the Church in the community in which we find ourselves.

We noted that in the Agikuyu world, worship and sacrifice are not new but priesthood is (refer chap. IV). What has become evident in making some Priests as African elders is a need to draw from our African cultures values that seemed to be overtaken by foreign values. Appropriating them in today's way of worshipping is to bring on board new patterns of ministry. These are the small beginnings that might bring about renewal thus filling the lacuna between traditional values and Christianity.

Finally, I admire those who are made elders at ordination. However, I do not think I fit being made an Agikuyu elder because, first, I am a candidate for a missionary priesthood and our focus is mission "*ad exteros*." I have trained away from my community for many years. Being made an elder at ordination will not have given people time to discover the integrity of life and maturity that I have acquired over the years. Again the Christianity values that I have acquired have to be in line

---

<sup>120</sup> Refer to the Appendix

with the values the Agikuyu people advocated before they made someone an elder. Secondly, I hope to be ordained a priest in Nakuru with two others from different ethnic communities and thirdly, institution into Agikuyu elderhood is not a custom in Nakuru Diocese. Fourth, the local community where I come from is multicultural and accepting this rite of institution will exclude other communities. The remaining option would be to arrange with relatives and friends but I am not willing to do so. I would prefer to wait until I appropriate all the values I have acquired and if the community wherever I will be working find me worthy, then, I can be elevated in the position of an elder there. However, I wish all priests who have been made elders in their communities all the best in their ministry.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Books

BARRA, G., *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs*, Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau 1991.

BAUSCH, J. W., *Ministry, Tradition, Tensions Transition*, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publication 1982.

FORESTELL, J. T., *As Ministers of Christ: The Christological Dimension of Ministry in the New Testament*, New York: Paulist Press 1991.

KENYATTA, J., *Facing Mount Kenya*, Nairobi: Kenway Publication 1978.

MAGESA, L., *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Nairobi: Paulines Publication 1998.

MITCHELL, N., *Mission and Ministry: History and Theology in the Sacrament of Order*, Dalaware: Michael Glazier 1982.

OSBORNE, K. B., *Priesthood: A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church*, Mahwah: Paulist Press 1988.

POWER, D. N., *Ministers of Christ and His Church: The Theology of Priesthood*, London: Geoffrey Chapman 1969.

WACHEGE, P. N., *Jesus Christ our Muthamaki (Ideal Elder): An African Christological Study Based on the Agikuyu Understanding of Elder*, Nairobi: Phoenix Publication 1992.

WAMBURU, F. G., *On Going Formation for Diocesan Priests with Special Reference to the Archdiocese of Nairobi*, Nairobi: CUEA Publications 2002.

### Unpublished Sources

MKENDA, E., *The Role of Elders in Moral Formation: A Case Study of the Agikuyu of Kiambu*, Nairobi: Maryknoll Institute of African Studies 2008.

### Articles

DOLAN, G., "The Churches, too, Need Some Policing", *Daily Nation*,  
27 October, 2008.

HINWOOD, B., "The Priest: A Functional Description", *AFER*, Vol. 22, No. 3  
(June 1980) 166-174.

HEARNE, B., "Priestly Ministry and Christian Community", *AFER*, Vol. 24,  
No. 4 (August 1982) 216-232.

MALITI, M., "Priesthood: A Call to Imitate Christ, the Good Shepherd", *AFER*,  
Vol. 39, No. 2 (April 1997) 87-93.

NJUE, J., "The Gift of Priesthood and Celibacy", *A Pastoral Letter to the Faithful*,  
Nairobi: Paulines Printing Press Training School, 16 June 2009

NZEKI, R. N., "Vocation and Formation of Priests", *AFER*, Vol. 32, No. 1  
(February 1990) 17-28.

WERUZANI, A., "Jesus the Local Priest", *AFER* Vol. 24, No. 1 (February 1982)  
31-34.

### Online Sources

MILLER, F. M., "Exploring the Wisdom of Africa: A Kikuyu Elderhood as an  
Oracle", Occasional Papers,  
<<http://mcc.org/respub/occasional/26oracle.html>>, 09/06/09.

MALONEY, R. P., "Vincentian Priesthood as Missionary", An Essay Written for the  
400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St. Vincent's ordination,  
<<http://famvin.org/library?e=q-o>>, 30/08/2009.

MUIGWITHANIA 2.0, "Before You Become a Kikuyu Elder"  
<<http://kikyunationalism.wordpress.com.2008/06/15/>>, 09/06/09.

### Other Sources

PAUL VI, "Ordination of priests", *The Roman Pontifical*, International Commission  
on the English Liturgy 1978.

-----, "Activity and Life of Priests", Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education,  
*Welcome to the Catholic Church*, Harmony CD-ROM, Version 2007.

BOLLE, K. W., "Priest and Priesthood", *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol. XI, Washington: The Catholic University of America 1981.

### **Interviews**

KARIUKI, J., "Traditional/Contemporary Elder", interviewed by author, Personal notes, 20/10/09, Nairobi.

MURIU, M and GICHUHI, P., "Traditional Elders", interviewed by author, Personal notes, 30/05/09, Nairobi.

MBURU, G., "Sacrificial council (*Maturanguru*)", interviewed by author, Personal notes, 30/05/09, Nairobi.

NJOROGE, J., "A Catholic Priest as an African Elder", interviewed by author, Personal notes 22/09/09, Nairobi.

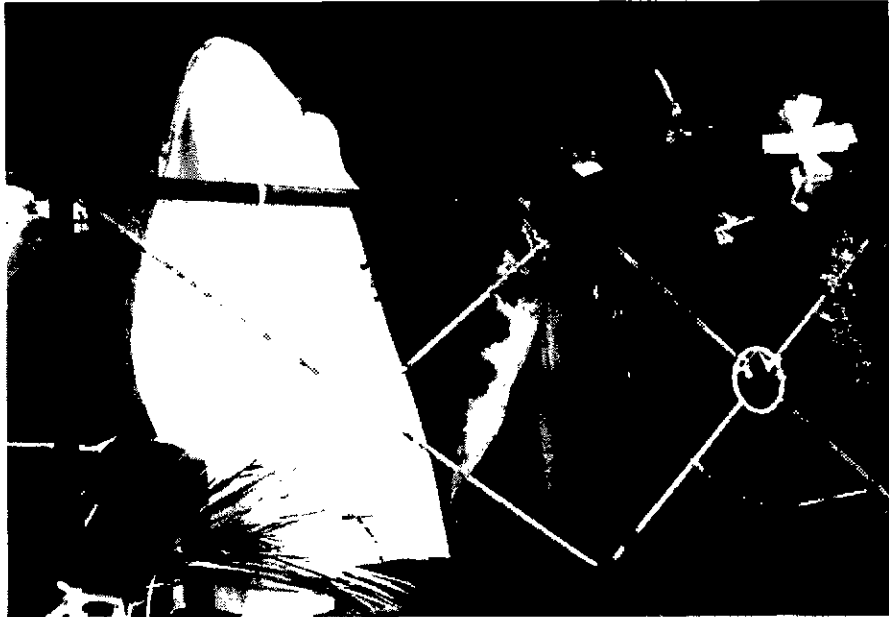
WANJIRU, P., "Traditional elders", interviewed by author, Personal notes, 06/06/09, Nairobi.

WANJHIA, M., "Priest as an African Elder", interviewed by author, Personal notes, 21/09/09, Nairobi.

## GLOSSARY

- Atungati* - Servants  
*Coro* – Blowing horn  
*Gikuyu and Mumbi* – The First ancestors  
*Githii*- An over dress made from a colubus monkey's or a cow's hide  
*Gutahikithio* – Being forced to vomit  
*Gutire muthungu na mubea* – No difference between colonizers and priests  
*Igongona* – Sacrifice  
*Itimu na ruhio rwa jora* – spear and sword  
*Jung'wa* – A three legged stool  
*Kang'ei* – newly married women  
*Kia mataathi* – Peacemakers  
*Kia matimu* – The spear holder  
*Kiama* – Council of elders  
*Kihii* – Uncircumcised boy  
*Kioho kia migathi* – Stringed beads  
*Kirinyaga* – Mount Kenya  
*Kuringithio thenge* – Act of oath taking  
*Maturanguru* – Sacrificial council  
*Mburi* – Goats  
*Mitugo na mikiire ya Agikuyu* – Agikuyu traditions and customs  
*Muthamaki/Mwathi* – Great ruler  
*Muthigi* – Special stick of an elder  
*Nyakinyua* – Elderly women  
*Ruhio* – Machete  
*Rwenji* – Circumciser's knife  
*Thahu* – Sin  
*Thai thathaiya Ngai thai* – We beseech you Ngai (God), we beseech you  
*Wazee* – Respectable or old men

## APPENDIX



An Agikuyu elder priest with cap and an overdress



A Newly ordained Kalenjin priest