

## The Impact of “Kekweimet” on Christian Beliefs and Practices Among the Keiyo Community of Kenya

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### Abstract

African religious practice constitutes an important component of the social and religious makeup and the cycle of harmony in the community. Despite the introduction of Christianity, most African communities have sustained cultural practices, some of which contrast with Christian beliefs. The main aim of this research was to evaluate the persistence of the cleansing ritual of *Kekweimet* among the Keiyo people of Kenya. This inquiry also sought to understand the social and religious implications of this cleansing ritual on the Keiyo Christians. A qualitative ethnographic approach was used for the study with a target sample size of 95 participants in Kapkei village on the Keiyo Border. Interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data and a thematic strategy was adopted for data analysis. The findings of the study revealed that *Kekweimet* was an important collective cleansing ritual still practiced by Keiyo Christians. The ritual process was meant to cleanse, remove bitterness in the grieving family, and repair the relationship between the clan of the deceased and the one who had committed murder. From the setting, there was a strong interaction between the Keiyo Christians and the cleansing ritual because of the involvement of church elders and the use of Christian-based prayer. The researcher determined that despite the constructive outcomes of *Kekweimet* the practice among Keiyo Christians surmounted syncretism and risked leading the faithful away from the Christian Faith.

**Keywords:** *Keiyo, Christians, Christianity, Holiness, Sin Murder, Cleansing Ritual, Syncretism*

### 1. Introduction

The recognition and practice of traditional culture among African communities have been revived in recent years with the onset of increased awareness and acknowledgement of different cultural heritages. In Kenya, the revival of the *Mungiki* and *Ogiek* encompassed undertones of resisting oppression and Western influences (Chabeda-Barthe & Haller, 2018, p. 2; Wamue, 2001, p. 453)<sup>1</sup>. While there is a global awareness and celebration of cultural heritage, the return to some of the traditional practices presents a significant risk to the authentic application of Christianity. Among the Keiyo, Christianity was significantly adopted, especially among the first-generation Christians who abandoned most harmful traditional practices. However, there

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<sup>1</sup>*Mungiki* refers to a religio-political movement composed mainly of large masses of Gikuyu origin, and other non-Gikuyu (Pokot's, Luos and Maasais). The term means 'fishing the crowd from all corners of Kenya and reflects the belief that the people are entitled to a plan

is the continued practice of cleansing rituals, some of which directly contrast the Christian Faith. The *Kekweimet* cleansing ritual among the Keiyo community is a payment in terms of cows given to the family of the deceased by the clan of the individual who committed the murder. The cleansing ritual is meant to remove pollution, restore balance within the community, and protect the guilty from the wrath of the divinities (Hutchins, 2007, p. 199).

This research purposed to investigate the impact of *Kekweimet* cleansing ritual on Christian beliefs and practices among the Keiyo people of Kenya. *Kekweimet* is performed to cleanse a person who has committed murder and the community from any misfortunes that could result from the murder. While *Kekweimet* is culturally significant, it is a source of conflict for Keiyo Christians as the ritual's practices and underlying beliefs contradict most Christian doctrines. This leads to religious and social misunderstandings. The practice of *Kekweimet* is deeply rooted within the Keiyo People and has the potential to sway Keiyo Christians from believing in the biblical teaching about the power of the blood of Christ. The problem primarily affects Keiyo Christians in the Elgeyo Border region, but it also has broader implications for understanding the interaction between traditional African religions and Christianity in similar contexts. The combination of *Kekweimet* and Christian teachings may lead to a distorted view of Christianity, particularly regarding the importance of the blood of Jesus. Some potential implications include weakened faith, challenges with spiritual development, distortion of core Christian beliefs, and increased conflict between the church and local communities. However, there may also be opportunities for evangelism, interfaith dialogue, and a better understanding of the social dynamics where community members engage in Christian practices with diverse beliefs and practices.

#### *A. Christian Perspectives of Sin and the Context of Murder*

The Ten Commandments in Christianity emphasize the importance of respecting God, human life, and property (Exodus 20:13).<sup>2</sup> Sinning is seen as a violation of the laws set by God. The Bible strongly links sin to being separated from God. Sin is the original cause of the fall of humanity (Genesis 3:6). The Gospel of John also associates sin with lawlessness. From this, we can understand that Christian theology views sin as disobedience to the divine, neglect or disrespect of life, and acting against the law. However, the concept of sin is more complex in Christianity. Different Christian doctrines and the distinction between the Old and New Testaments mean sin is categorized in various ways but with the common theme of being separated from purity. In the Old Testament, Genesis 9:6 states “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his image”. In addition, Numbers 35: 30-31 asserts that “If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses.

#### *B. African Societal Understanding of Sin and the Context of Murder*

Like Christianity, most African Traditional Societies fundamentally believe in the sanctity of life. According to Nhlapo (2017, p. 4), the indiscriminate killing of members of the community was inherently wrong. Massam (1968, p. 171) additionally discusses the fundamentals of morality including respecting the elders and avoiding taboos. The belief in spiritual influences, both good and evil was also dominant and was accompanied by rituals and the use of symbol protections to deter evil (Joseph, 2014, p. 62). As noted by Verhoef (2014, p. 260), evil could come from natural sources or actual sins committed by man. According to Dzata (2022, p. 62),

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<sup>2</sup>Thou shalt not kill. 14 Thou shalt not commit adultery. 15 Thou shalt not steal. 16 Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. [Exodus 20:13]

the spirits of those who had died unnatural deaths were unable to rest and this resulted in bad omens to the community.

In the Keiyo traditional beliefs, the concept of sin is tied to human responsibility, natural causes, and association with the deities. Keiyo people would know they had done something wrong when their god *Asis* (the god of rain) did not favor them (Tarus, 1994, p. 65). Sins and evil acts are associated with taboos called *kikirei*. Big sins, known as *ng'okiy*, are seen as serious transgressions that invite curses, while smaller sins, called *chalwok*, are more like childlike mistakes. The community also used informal education to explain what is sinful and deter people from committing offenses (Chang'ach, 2013, p. 862). The severity of sin was judged based on the harm done - for example, violence or murder is seen as a more serious sin than telling lies. The notion of *kikirei* plays a big role in guiding acceptable behavior and practices in the Keiyo community (Sergon, 2022, p. 42). Violating *kikirei* is seen as a sin against the Supreme Being. The Keiyo community highly values life, which is reflected in the care and protection given to expectant mothers and children to preserve the circle of life (Ng'otie et al., n.d.). Children are shielded from potential malevolent forces to protect them from sin. Actions against life, like murder, are seen as the biggest sins that attract the wrath of the deities (Ng'otie et al., n.d.).

### C. *Cleansing Rituals and Socioreligious Implications*

In many traditional African and global cultures, cleansing rituals are believed to have a spiritual impact on the individuals involved, as well as the wider community (Awolalu, 1976, p. 277). The cleansing act often has an external component, but it is also perceived to have spiritual effect. These cleansing rituals are accompanied by specific requirements, such as sacrifices, the timing of the ritual, the clothes worn, and the direction one faces (Awolalu, 1976, p. 277). The purpose of these rituals is to restore divine relationships and purify the person or community from perceived pollution, sin, or corruption (Hutchings, 2007, pp. 195-196). Scholars have recognized the significance of elements like salt, water, and fire in cleansing and purification rituals, and their connection to the spiritual world (Johnson, 2003, pp. 63, 111, 127). Cleansing rituals in many social communities and religious affiliations are closely tied to the concepts of purity and pollution (Hutchings, 2007, p. 199). Impurity is often linked to risks to the community, and cleansing intends to achieve a state of religious cleanliness and holiness (Awolalu, 1976, p. 276). As noted by Bocharov (2017, p. 110), fear is believed to be central in the observation of morality and the performance of cleansing rituals to restore morality. The fear of punishment and danger from spirits and deities is a psychological creation, but it has led to the idea of purity (Bocharov, 2017, p. 110). In the Keiyo community, specific fears associated with farming and floods led to the observation of religious practices and paying homage to the god *Asis* (Tarus, 1994, p. 50). Indigenous evidence of divinity also created this fear, which led to the ideal of purity (Yoo, 2021, p. 333). Apart from maintaining a state of religiosity, cleansing rituals further served as a form of social control, as ritual leaders who were also community leaders used the practices to maintain order in society (Bocharov, 2017, p. 111). The practice of ostracizing members who committed murder acted as a warning to others, making the culture solid and fundamental to the communities (Bocharov, 2017, p. 114). Both the Christian and African religious contexts strongly favor cleansing because of the aspects of holiness, cleanliness, and the sanctity of life, particularly in the case of homicide (Adewuya, 1999, p. 10). In the Swahili context, cleansing denotes the removal of evil, which is seen as a social process where one can go back to society after the ritual (Adewuya, 1999, p. 125). However, there are differences between the concept of holiness in Christianity and being separate from taboo in African traditional society (Harries, 2013, p. 2).

## 2. Methodology

Using the interpretivism research tradition to understand how people make meaning, this study adopted a phenomenological qualitative inquiry to understanding the concept of *Kekweimet* and its comprehension by the Keiyo people of the Keiyo Border in Uasin Gishu (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Acknowledgement of Indigenous voices was also important as suggested by Denzin et al. (2016, p. 770). This was paramount because of the theological standpoint of the researcher and the educational background which may have influenced how the researcher understood the participants. The study was conducted in Kapkei Village, which is in the Keiyo region of Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. The village has a population of around 180,000 people, with an estimated 2,800 older adults. The sample size was 95 participants, including elders and ritual leaders from the Keiyo community living in Kapkei Village. The data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions. To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, the study used triangulation by comparing responses from different participants, as well as member checking, where the researcher went back to the participants to confirm their previous responses. The validity of the research was ensured through reflexivity and respondent validation. Data analysis employed thematic analysis and the key ethical considerations included the dilemma of Christian research on cultural practices, the confidentiality of the participants, and obtaining informed consent.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The research accessed and interviewed three elders and one *Kiborennotiot* (a high-level ritual leader) who had been directly involved in performing the *Kekweimet* ritual. Family and clan members who had either participated in or had knowledge of the ritual process were part of the study as well as three people who had committed murder and participated in the *Kekweimet* ritual. The *Kiborennotiot* are considered the highest-level ritual leaders, above reproach, and very important in the community. The two elders were assistants to the *Kiborennotiot*, responsible for tasks like arranging the ritual space, receiving sacrifices, and mediating between the priest and the people. Out of the 95 total participants, 15 were women, while 80 were men. The women could only provide second-hand information since they were forbidden from directly participating in the ritual based on Keiyo cultural traditions. Surprisingly, most of the participants identified as Christians, including 10 church elders who had previously been involved in the *Kekweimet* ritual. This was unexpected, as the researcher had anticipated the ritual would be more prevalent among non-Christians. The researcher also found that *Kekweimet* was recommended not just for incidents of cattle theft, as initially expected, but for any murder that occurred in the community.

From the findings, the meaning of *Kekweimet* was a collective payment to the family of the deceased intending to seek forgiveness. A participant noted that;

When somebody has committed murder, whether on purpose or by accident, you look for a way to ask for forgiveness. Killing is not allowed. *Kekweimet*/Kebaas is the collective payment for the bloodshed through murder.

Asking for forgiveness involved payment of 9 cows and the first cow (*Chemuron/ Cheririt*) was tied outside the homestead of the grieving family to begin the cleansing ritual. One of the participants stated, “When the family wakes up in the morning and sees the cow, they understand that the cow was brought in by the family of the one who has committed the crime”. Untying the cow would signify the acceptance by the family to begin the cleansing ritual. The aggrieved family is advised against refusing the payment because this may result in a curse.

The findings emphasized that the ritual was a collective responsibility to show how sin in the form of murder affected the whole society.

**Table 1: Kekweimet Ritual Requirements**

Milk	A sign of cleansing and life as well as refreshment
Honey	To signify the sweetening of the pain
Millet	Believed to remove the bitterness of the murder
Tebeng'wet leaves	To hold the millet seeds
<i>Sosiot</i>	Linked to cleansing as it used to wash the milk calabash
<i>Koranet</i> -Ghee traditional	To apply to each other's cheeks during the ritual
Water	Water For spitting out the millet. Water is also a cleansing agent
Remaining 8 cows	Collective payment of animals. Cows are very precious in the Keiyo culture and signify the worth of life in the ritual
<i>Igomiet</i>	Cleansing of the remaining bitterness caused by the act of murder. The medicine is very rare and is treated as precious to the community

During the ritual, the affected families faced each other and introduced themselves to the clans they belonged to. The clan of the accused would then state their intention to seek forgiveness as a clan because of the murder that had been committed. Milk from both parties is mixed in one container and drunk by all members of the ritual. This is then followed by the distribution of millet leaves, known as *Tebeng'wet*, to each individual present. Millet seeds are then placed inside the lower lip of the attendees, who are instructed to spit them out. This powerful gesture symbolizes the removal of any lingering bitterness or resentment surrounding the traumatic event. Next, honey from both the victim's and perpetrator's families are carefully mixed using a special tool called *Sosiot*. This honey is then applied to the right hands of the parties involved, who reverently lick it off. The sweetness of the honey represents the restoration of goodwill and the return to a normal, functional state of relationships. To further cleanse any remaining traces of negativity, a rare and potent medicinal plant called *Igomiet* is distributed and consumed by each member. This powerful herb is believed to purge any residual bitterness from the hearts and minds of those affected.

In a profound gesture of reconciliation, the attendees then line up facing one another, and ghee or oil is placed on their hands. They then tenderly apply the sacred substance to each other's cheeks, symbolizing the renewed ability to form familial bonds and even intermarry, as the community seeks to rebuild what was lost. Finally, prayers are offered by a revered elder, sometimes even a senior church leader, who declares forgiveness, bestows blessings and severs the spiritual connection to the sin. As a culmination of the ritual, the victim's family unties and leads 8 cows to their homestead, signifying their acceptance of the cleansing process and the

beginnings of true reconciliation. Throughout the *Kekweimet* ceremony, the repetition of key phrases and the collective participation of the community reinforce the gravity of the situation and the unity required to navigate the path towards healing and restoration.

The findings also noted that *Kekweimet* ritual was important for social discipline. It was believed that it restored social order, especially after a great sin such as murder which has the potential to create strong conflicts in the society. The focus group discussions revealed that the *Kekweimet* ritual is still practiced today when someone commits murder, whether intentional or accidental. Some members explained that Christianity is often seen to regard everything African as evil, and people are hesitant to talk about *Kekweimet* to avoid stigma, even though it affects many members of the church. It was reported that church leaders were aware of the ritual and were even involved in guiding the process, but they did not discuss it openly in the church. The *Kiborenotiot* (high-level ritual leader) stated that there is a gap in Christianity that could be filled by studying and understanding the Keiyo culture. They explained that the *kikirei* described in the Keiyo community are like the sins forbidden in the Bible, and not everything about their culture is evil. One respondent advised that the *Kekweimet* practice is very important and should be maintained among Keiyo Christians. They linked it to the story of Cain's punishment from God and society, noting that bloodshed can never go unpunished. Elders believed that cultural knowledge is currently treated lightly, especially in the church. They explained that there are similarities between the church and Keiyo culture, such as the use of oil and the importance of engagement, and that the *Kekweimet*/*Kebaas* ritual is valid even among Christians. The elders and *Kiborenotiot* recommended studying both culture and the Bible, as most things are similar, such as the concept of prayer and forgiveness. They argued that the significance of life is not as important anymore, as women are no longer as protected, and that taboos have been removed by Christianity, leading to a compromise of the truth.

From the literature, Hutchins (2007) discussed the concept of collective responsibility which is evident from the findings of the *Kekweimet* ritual. An entire clan would confess to the murder committed by one individual because they believed in this collective responsibility. The fear of excommunication and punishment from the deities necessitated cleansing rituals which can be surmised as an important motivator for *Kekweimet*. The importance of the value of life is expressed in the findings and mirrors Rosner (1969), where life is found to be extremely essential to the extent that some laws can be ignored to save lives. In many religious traditions, including Christianity, sacrificial offerings of animals and the accompanying bloodshed have historically served as a means of atoning for sins and restoring one's righteousness before the divine (Hartman, 2013). The blood sacrifice represented a symbolic purification to reconcile human failings with the divine.

This importance of blood is also reflected in the *Kekweimet* ritual practiced by the Keiyo community. The pain from the bloodshed of the cow used in the ritual is seen as equating to the pain felt by the aggrieved family. Through the research, some participants expressed familiarity with the Old Testament tradition of sacrifices. The use of blood and animal sacrifice in the *Kekweimet* ritual serves a similar purpose to the biblical tradition - as a means of atonement, purification, and restoring the relationship between the human and the divine. The participants recognized these underlying similarities between their cultural practices and the Judeo-Christian scripture teachings.

The findings illustrated a justification of *Kekweimet* based on the sanctity of life and the need for restitution. However, Gehman (2005, p. 231) argues that God has been removed from

African rituals.<sup>3</sup> In the ritual, the beginning and the end involved Christian prayer while the rest of the ritual used Keiyo religious symbolism. The blood of Jesus has not been acknowledged in the ritual is the only way to achieve cleansing in Christianity. Pauline theology emphasizes separation from pollution to achieve cleanliness as well as the fear of God as opposed to the fear of consequences which is an important principle in the practice of *Kekweimet*. From the ritual, the involvement of Keiyo Christians has not been publicized by the church but there is a silent acceptance. The concept of religious syncretism can be used to explain modern-day Christian practice of compromising traditional practices with Christianity.

#### 4. Conclusion

The *Kekweimet* cleansing ritual is used in the Keiyo community to restore relationships when murder is committed. The ritual is important because of the sanctity of life in the community. The Keiyo people hold that there is no alternative option for penance when murder is committed, and seeking forgiveness through the church alone is insufficient. *Kekweimet* directly challenges Christian doctrine about the cleansing of sin, as it takes precedence over any Christian practice of cleansing and forgiveness. Despite this, it was found that Christians in the community are deeply involved in the *Kekweimet* ritual, although they do not publicly acknowledge it in the church. The ritual's gravity is evident from the involvement of church leaders in the prayers when the cleansing process is complete. There is significant controversy stemming from the dominance of Christianity in the community, and the participants suggested the need to include more cultural practices like *Kekweimet*. This poses a challenge to the Pauline theologies of Christology and Soteriology, which hold that salvation can only be achieved through Jesus Christ for reconciliation with God the Father.

#### 5. Recommendations

From this study, it is recommended that Christians receive additional guidance in practicing the Christian Faith, especially after receiving salvation. It is acknowledged that culture remains an important part of the fabric of different African societies. However, emphasizing that salvation can only be truly achieved through Jesus Christ requires improved teaching of authentic Faith to help Christians grow in the belief that Jesus Christ is the only way and salvation.

#### Limitations

Disclosure of information from potential key informants was limited due to the protected nature of the ritual information in the Keiyo community. The patriarchal context of the Keiyo community also meant the researcher as a female was undermined, as access to deep insights about rituals is male-dominated. To address this, the researcher asked for permission beforehand and was allowed to talk to elders but was not permitted to attend the actual ritual process due to gendered cultural restrictions. The study also anticipated that some of the information provided would be expected to be kept discrete, which could have affected the results. However, the respondents were willing to disclose the processes and requirements of the ritual, which provided significant insights into *Kekweimet*.

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<sup>3</sup> Behind the usage there is obviously a polemic against paganism. their presence of images as the focus of worship is used to emphasize the unreality of heathen beliefs and the heathen gods. For the Jews, Idols and heathen deities are identical, and they prove that the heathen has images but no true God. Thus is the word for both images and gods. The word idol in its emphasis is often laid on the idea of an object of false worship rather than on that of something without reality which fools have put in place of the true God. In its strict sense the idol is not merely an alternative god; it is an unreal god, and therefore falls as distinct from true and real. (Kittel et al., p. 377).

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