

The Ngao Christian Village: A Contested Missionary Station in Colonial Kenya

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Abstract

The village of Ngao, situated on the delta of the Tana River along Kenya's northern Indian Ocean coast, is, in many ways, a contested and controversial heritage site. Both the Pokomo and the Galla communities claim ownership, as did the Germans and the British before and during the First and Second World Wars. Consequently, the German Neukirchen Mission and the two main British missionary societies—the Methodist Missionary Society and the Church Missionary Society—contested control over Ngao. The interests of colonial powers and the influence of Christian missionaries generated suspicion and conflict, which were further exacerbated by the two world wars, leading to repeated expulsions and arrests of German missionaries. The local community's resistance to British control—particularly attempts to reintroduce the Methodist Mission—interfered with the village's social organisation and led to long-term alienation with far-reaching implications. This article draws on archival and oral history methods to reconstruct the story of Ngao's Christianisation within the broader contexts of colonialism and inter-tribal conflict. It argues that Ngao is a contested space with a mixed heritage, situated at the intersection of European and African cultural identities, three major religions, and two global conflicts.

Keywords: German Neukirchen Mission; East Africa; cultural heritage; colonialism; British; church history



Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae

Volume 52 | Number 1 | 2026 | #20007 | 12 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/20007>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)

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Introduction

When Dr Ludwig Krapf of the London-based Church Missionary Society (CMS) arrived in Mombasa in 1844, his primary objective was to move northward and use the nomadic Galla community as a gateway for evangelising East Africa. He had developed a strong interest in them during earlier encounters in Ethiopia. However, the Galla were more closely affiliated with Islam and strongly resisted Christianity. As a result, Krapf redirected his efforts to the Mijikenda and established a Christian settlement in Rabai in 1846.

Rabai Mpya subsequently became the CMS headquarters and a launching point for missionary expansion into northern and inland East Africa. In 1853, however, Krapf left Rabai for England, citing health concerns and growing impatience from CMS leadership regarding his methods. His publication, *Travels, Researches and Missionary Labours*, attracted the interest of the United Methodist Free Church Mission (UMCFM), which invited him to accompany Thomas Wakefield to establish a new station at Ribe, with plans to expand to Jomvu, Lamu, and Sagalla (Pirouet 1999).

The Ribe station was established in 1862, and both CMS and UMCFM expanded their activities along the coast. CMS later affiliated with several communities, including Forodhoyo (1870), Jilore (1890), and Kaloleni (1904). Meanwhile, UMCFM maintained its focus on reaching the Galla. In 1886, John Houghton and his wife Anne were sent to Golbanti, a Galla village near the Tana River, approximately 7.9 kilometres north of Ngao. The station had been founded in 1883 by Reverend William During, a freed slave from Sierra Leone (Arensen 2009).

Tragically, less than a month after their arrival, the Houghtons were killed alongside approximately 50 locals during a Maasai raid on 24 February 1886. The attackers accused the missionaries of supplying firearms to the Galla in earlier conflicts (Brewin 2010). This interpretation contrasts with other accounts suggesting that local resistance to Christianity played a significant role (Oduor 2024).

At the same time, a German missionary society was establishing a presence in nearby Ngao, a Pokomo settlement located about five miles upstream from Golbanti. Ngao lies roughly 400 km north of Malindi, within present-day Tana River County. The region is inhabited primarily by the agrarian Pokomo and the pastoral Galla communities. Reverend Ferdinand Wurtz of the German Neukirchen Mission arrived in Ngao in March 1887 and established a base for literacy and evangelisation (National Museums of Kenya 2019).

However, the arrival of European missionaries alarmed the Muslim Galla community, who destroyed the initial mission structures. The missionaries relocated across the river and focused on the Pokomo. This shift became symbolically significant, associating Christianity with the Pokomo and Islam with the Galla—an identity division that continues to influence inter-communal tensions.

The distribution of missionary activity along the East African coast was closely tied to European geopolitical competition, particularly following the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, which formalised colonial claims in Africa (Mwombeki 2024). Although Germany never gained formal control over the Ngao region, German missionaries remained active there, often viewed with suspicion by British authorities—especially during the world wars.

The article attempts to retell the story of Ngao Christianisation in the context of colonialism and inter-tribal conflicts. It argues that Ngao is a contested space with a mixed heritage that sits in the nexus between European and African cultural identities, three major religions, and two world wars. It relies on data collected through archival and oral history methods from local museums, personal archives, digital sources, and interviews with family and friends of early Church workers. Through the periodisation technique, the story of Ngao may be told in three main epochs: the missionary establishment period (1887–1914), the post-First World War period (1914–1940, and the post-Second World War period (1945–1964). In this regard, the arrival of Wurts in 1887, the expulsion of German missionaries at the start of the First World War in 1914, the second expulsion of German missionaries during the Second World War, as well as the national independence of the Kenyan state in 1964 mark three significant epochs with unique characteristics.

Ngao in the Missionary Establishment period (1887 to 1914)

According to Paul Pakia, a resident of Ngao who was born in 1921. Rev. Ferdinand Wurtz sensed a call from God to serve in Africa in 1844, and he immediately started learning the African way of life. Together with Webar, they started their work in Egypt and finally landed on Lamu Island. On 17 March 1887, Wurts arrived at the original Ngao Village in the Tana-Delta District. The original Ngao Village was across the Tana River, directly opposite the present settlement. He immediately started the work of evangelism. He was nicknamed *Bwana Mwalimu* in Swahili, which means “Lord Teacher” because of the peculiar way in which he taught. He worked with Hanrich Blecher, another missionary. In addition to evangelism, the missionaries introduced their students to basic reading and writing skills. In 1888, missionary Webar arrived at Ngao accompanied by his wife. However, the increase in white missionaries agitated the Galla people, who burned down their house in a protest attack. Another setback was the Malaria disease, which attacked Blecher on Sunday, 26 July. Three more missionaries from the German Neukrichen Mission arrived in March 1889.

The Neukrichen staff were Ferdinand Wurtz, Weber, Boacking, and St. Christine Soniteachzen. The increase in the number of missionaries and the frequent attacks by the Galla people necessitated a relocation across the river to the more friendly Pokomo people. The missionaries resettled in a corner of the village locally rendered as Silowa or Kisichi area. The remains of this early missionary construction are still visible to visitors.

In the 1890s, diseases and wars were rife, but these did not deter the spirit of the German missionaries. In September 1890, a fierce inter-tribal war broke out in Witu. Valiant men from Ngao risked their lives to save the missionaries and send them to Lamu. In 1891, the missionaries returned, and a feast was held in their honour by the Ngao people. Reverend Wutz, together with some of his fellow missionaries and a local Pokomo man called Abadula, published the first Pokomo dictionary and the first book in the Pokomo language titled *Chikwe*. *Chikwe* means “dove,” and it was a call to peaceful coexistence among the tribes.

The year 1891 witnessed another relocation of the missionaries further up the hill to where the present missionary house and church are located. The Ngao people called it the *Mzungu* (white man) hill, as it was inhabited by white missionaries only. As the funding from GNM increased, there was a need to build more permanent structures. However, a contestation over land ownership between the Neukirchen and the Methodist missionaries in the neighbouring Golbanti area was growing. The Methodists claimed that the whole area between Lake Shakababo and the Tana River was theirs since it was sold to them by a Galla elder. The Pokomos refuted that claim, arguing that it had been their farming land for ages. In addition, the Methodist missionaries had intended to work among the nomadic Gallas, whereas the Neukirchen Mission was focused on the Pokomo. This land conflict and competition for resources was, by extension, transferred to the missionaries from the two main local tribes in the region. The conflict would eventually become even more pronounced in later years. Nevertheless, the German missionaries went ahead and built a Church and a two-storey missionary house on their newly acquired land. On 4 November 1898, the British colonial government allocated 30 acres of land to the Neukrichen Mission for a 99-year lease. The following year, the Neukrichen missionaries moved to their new house even though it was incomplete. The mission house was finally completed in 1902.

The year 1892 witnessed diseases, deaths, and expansion. Sadly, Mrs Webar, Hanrich Blecher, and Regina Bocking died from malaria-related complications. However, the team grew bigger with the arrival of Muholf, Wilk Schmidt, Hayer, Beckeer, and Sister Eva Velte. A breakthrough in evangelism was witnessed towards the end of the year when Rev. Wurtz gathered the people and preached the Gospel, asking them to assure him that they would not follow after witchcraft and other things associated with it, such as *uganga*, *kidjo*, *ngadzi*, and *fururie*. A large congregation of Ngao people gave him the assurance that they would follow the Lord Jesus Christ alone and abandon witchcraft and other traditions contrary to the Word. This was followed by the first group baptism, where on 1 March 1894, eight Pokomo became Christians and were baptised. These were Kiripa, Chadhoru, Kirage, Lulutya, Subo, Gudina, Zamani, and Abaddula. Abaddula was of great help to Wurtz in literary works such as writing the Pokomo language, translating the New Testament to Pokomo, translating church hymns, and translating a summary of the Old Testament to the Pokomo language. The year 1894 was also significant in that Rev. Wurtz finalised the translation of the Gospel of Mark

into Pokomo before he suddenly returned home in Germany, where he died at an early age of 36 years.

The arrival of the first motor boat on the Tana River in 1895 had a significant positive impact on the missionaries' work. Christened "*Nagheya ya Tsana*," meaning "Peace of Tana," the GNK-sponsored boat facilitated access to Pokomo villages along the Tana River. The latter also sailed up and down the river regularly as a public transport system. It was also in 1895 that missionaries started sending converts to Germany for training so that they could acquire various skills as a strategic plan of Christianisation. The first of these was Chadhoru Tutu, who went to Germany for a two-year course in metalwork (Buya 2015). He also learnt the skill of translation. He returned to Kenya in 1897. The second to visit was Jilo Kutii, who, between 1900 and 1901, was in Germany learning carpentry (Buya 2015).

Missionary work expanded quickly since the Neukrichen Mission taught the locals how to read and write while at the same time, teaching them the Word of God. The second group of six converts was baptised at Ngao in 1896. These were Duo, who was called Christian, Kagala, who was baptised into Filipo, Didila, who was baptised into Nathaniel, Mungatana, Gwiyo, and Jillo Kutii. The evangelism team used the Naghea boat to reach the Chara area, bringing about the conversion of a renowned witch doctor, Amabeta, and his two brothers, Kanjala and Nkaduda. However, the three were poisoned and killed by their people for accepting Christianity. The Neukirchen were so successful that the Swedish missionaries, who had recently started a camp in Makere in the northern Tana region, sold it to them at 1,400 rupees and left. Missionaries, Messrs Wartenberg and Langach, started their work in this area and later on relocated to Wenje, where there were Bamberga, Weidt, Wibe, and Hermann Schmidt. Similarly, Kulesa Missionary Centre, which was under the Swedish missionary Hendenstrom, was sold to Neukrichen for 3,000 rupees in 1902 (Kimani 2020).

Missionary Heyer took charge of the mission and was later joined by Berker. Another new frontier by the Ngao-based Neukrichen mission was Lamu, where missionaries constructed a mission house, a children's school, and a Bible school. The teachers were Mulhoff, Kraft, Eckhard, Pieper, and Fink. Indeed, 1892 was a watershed year because it presented setbacks such as the Ngao fire that brought down the carpentry workshop, as well as the breakdown of the Naghea 1 motorboat, which had been used for seven years, constantly ferrying the sick to Ngao dispensary. The translation work also recorded great strides with the completion of the first Pokomo New Testament, the Pokomo Hymn book, and the catechism. It was also in 1892 that the Superintendent Stursbarg visited the churches in Lamu and Tana River as a way of inspecting the mission progress. According to a report done by Missionary Mulhoff in 1900, 90% of the people of Ngao had converted to Christianity (National Museums of Kenya 2019).

Between 1904 and 1906, Ngao witnessed a robust growth of facilities and construction. A large church was constructed on Wazungu Hill with a cross at the top, quite similar

to others built in Rabai Village, Ribe, and Protestant Europe. However, this building became a centre of controversy and was abandoned. Today, it is a historical site with great heritage value, yet it lies in ruins and dilapidation. A college was built in Lamu that taught Mathematics, World History, Geography, English, and other important subject areas. The college ran a two-year training programme. The first lot of trainee teachers comprised eight students, five from Ngao village.

The Hola Mission was built in 1909, and missionaries, Weidt and Pfeifer, were sent there. They were shortly joined by Cilox and Herman Schmidt. The arrival of the new motorboat in 1910 made Hola very accessible from Ngao as the two boats, Naghea 1 and 2, alternated the route, bringing in workers and goods to the village churches along the Tana. Local labourers appointed to work with the missionaries were Van Engal, Jungist, Mungatana, Nathaniel, Chadhor, with Mr Pappinga as their leader.

By 1914, Neukrichen Mission had been fully established in Ngao and its environs. Mrs Krapf had finished translating the Book of Psalms in the Pokomo language. A 1913 massive baptism in Hola consisted of 469 people from Makere in Ngwano up to the Milalulu area. There were about 623 school-going children in the region. Evangelism, translation, training, and medical services were robust with promising expansion. However, the First World War broke out in 1914 and abruptly interfered with the missionary enterprise. All the missionaries were sent to India, and all the churches and projects were put under the stewardship of the Methodist Church since its missionaries were English men and women. Indeed, the German missionaries did not even have a chance to say goodbye to congregations. However, local teachers and evangelists continued the work. These able men in charge were Simeon Ubo and Reube Dala of Ngao, Benjamin Ndumari of Mwanadhamba, Mishael Bahari of Garseni, Emmanuel Joseph of Kulesa, and Abae Galana of Wenje, among others. As a witness to the impressive African leadership, in 1920, when Reverend Hopkins of Methodism visited the Neukrichen churches, he baptised 370 new believers.

The Ngao people's response to this World War disruption was not immediate.¹ Why the German missionaries became suspect was not immediately clear. Even more disturbing was the replacement of Neukrichen with Methodism by a colonial power. As expected, there was a strong rejection of the new order. Various reports done at the early return of German missionaries were equally disturbing. Contextual differences among the missionaries on how to respond to cultural issues of the African convert, such as polygamy and alcohol drinking, were on the increase. For instance, in 1928, missionary Becker wrote a report arguing, contrary to August, that churches in Tana River should not be permitted to take alcohol. The report was necessitated by controversies that arose after the short missionary work of August Krapf. Wilhelm Nitsch, the superintendent of Neukirchen Mission, also wrote a report on the work done by August Kraft during the period just after the First World War. Teacher Kanana also wrote a similar report to the

1 The First World War continued between 1914 and ended in 1918. The Second World War begun in September 1939 and ended in 1945.

Neukirchen Mission. Then August Kraft committed suicide at Hola, which was his workstation. His body was carried on a canoe to Ngao under the custodianship of teacher Isaya Mwanijwa. His burial tomb in Ngao Village is a painful reminder of conflicts and differences that came to be associated with the mission in the aftermath of the First World War. Whereas some opine that Kraft had a mental condition that became fatal, Reverend Francis Tumaini of Africa Inland Church in Ngao (Tumaini 2025) narrated passionately that, “Krapf committed suicide due to rejection in Germany of his teachings that sought to legalize polygamy and alcohol for the Christian Pokomos.”²

Ngao in the Post First World War Missionary Period (1918–1938)

The British administration’s strategy was to replace the German missionaries immediately. However, the GNM was determined to continue with the Ngao work and put up a plan immediately after the First World War (Bonaya 2016). Indeed, GNM was keen to open up new stations in Bura, Milalulu, and Karara through the work of missionaries, Herman Müller, Fritz Gissel, Hanna Gissel, and Walter Staubing, who arrived in Ngao in 1930. Reading the mood of the British, they linked their work more with that of a neighbouring friendly colony, Tanzania. In the year 1930, teachers Benjamin Ndumari and Manase Dyiye were sent to Uha in Tanganyika for evangelism work.³

In the new comeback, the GNM was keen on improving the medical and educational conditions at Ngao. In 1931, the missionaries began the construction of Ngao Hospital, completing two wards by 1932. The first overseer of the hospital was Miss Lina Leukel. She recruited Duda, Mashiloo, Steven, and Kirage for on-the-job training as nurses. Martha Gudina was trained as a midwife. Mr and Mrs Dirk Van de Waal, Walter Staubing, and Fritz Gissel oversaw the development of all the constructions from Hola to Ngao.

On the other hand, Herman Müller oversaw education, supervising all institutions in the district (Anassa 1935). Between 1935 and 1937, Herman set out Ngao as an educational centre in the region. He sent four teachers for Primary 4 (P4) training at Jeans School in Kabete, Nairobi (Muller 1939). These were Amos Chadboro, Kaleb Madyawa, Israel Gudina, and Seti Musa. These teachers were instrumental in Ngao Hill Primary School. In 1938, Herman Müller started a teacher training college at Ngao and became its first principal. He reorganised the entire educational leadership so that Israel Gudina was made the headmaster of Ngao Elementary School; Amos Chadboro was made the principal of Ngao Hill Primary School; Caleb Madyawa took charge of the boarding

2 Rev. Francis Tumaini, Interview by Stephen Muoki Joshua at the Ngao AIC Church on 20th February 2025.

3 Tanzania became a united republic comprising Zanzibar Island and Tanganyika Mainland much later in 1963. During the First World War and the Second World War, the entire Tanzania was a colony of Germany before its defeat and takeover by the British.

sections of the Teachers Training College and the Primary School, and J.M Paul was removed from active teaching duty to take on office duties (May 1937).

The GNM missionary plans and efforts in Ngao were abruptly interrupted by war again. In September 1939, the Second World War began. Herman Müller and his colleagues had to leave hurriedly. The missionaries who remained behind were Mr and Mrs Wilhem May. They were captured in Wenje, where they had been serving, and were brought by canoes to Ngao. They bade farewell to the people of Ngao and left as prisoners of war.

Ngao in Post-Second World War Missionary Period (1939/1945–1964)

The “spirit of Ngao” after the departure of German missionaries can be summarised as that of resilience and resistance. However, there was also confusion and division among church leaders and congregants regarding affiliation and the way forward. The churches, the hospital, and the schools continued with their services to the people, hoping that one day the missionaries would return (Buya 2015). The memory of Lysania Buya, who was born on 29 January 1929, was quite clear:

After taking counsel with some Pokomo elders who were then in Mombasa, our people desired to join with the Church Missionary Society (CMS). This opened doors for Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Beacher to come to Ngao in 1940 and to preach the gospel and teach songs such as *Since Jesus came into my heart* and so on. The coming of Beacher opened a door for Paulo Pakia and Teofilo Daido to get an opportunity to go to Kaloleni and join standard 4. Mr. Paul Pakia continued with his studies until he completed P3. He was the first P3 teacher in the district. He studied at Kahuhia College from 1945 to 1946. Mr. Parmena Mungatana and Mr. Yohana Petro also joined Kaloleni for P4 training in 1942. (Buya 1999)

Various missionary societies expressed interest in inheriting the GNM work in Ngao. In 1942, the Methodist missionaries petitioned the government that the MMS worked closely with the Neukirchen Mission and therefore they had the right to take oversight of the work. Whereas MMS was closer considering their presence in Golbanti Village, it was CMS that was more familiar with German work historically, since Rabai had had many German missionaries, including the founder Dr Ludwig Krapf. Nevertheless, the MMS petition was successful. This brought new changes since in 1943, some of the students in Ngao had to join the college in Ribe MMS Kaloleni. The first group consisted of Asser Silvano, Yohana Stefano, Yona Nkanu, and Timona Marko. In 1944, another group joined the school, consisting of Jato Amos (Ngao), Bampae Samaitwa (Gadeni), Lisania Onesmo (Ngao), Yuda (Kulesa), Jackson Galana (Wenje), Israel Matayo (Maremba), and Daniel Philipo (Ngao) (Bobaya 2016). However, the intervention of MMS was highly contested, both in Ngao and externally among political and religious societies. This contestation necessitated a conference at the end of the Second World War. The timing was critical as the end of the war created the space for the possibility of GNM’s return. The National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK)

was the convener of the 1945 conference in Ngao. Clerence Buya Bonaya recounted as follows:

Mwaka wa 1945 Kulifanywa Kongamona Kubwa sana hapa Ngao iliyohusisha makanisa yote hapa Pokomoni. Kongamona hilo iliongozwa na shirika kuu la makanisa Kenya (N.C.C.K) wakitaka kujua hasa kwamba makanisa hapa Pokomoni wangependa kuongozwa na dhehebu gani?

(In 1945, there was a big conference held at Ngao by the National Church Council of Kenya (N.C.C.K). They wanted a decision to be reached on which denomination would take charge of the churches of the Pokomo tribe) (Bonaya 2016).

The outcome of the conference was unprecedented. The churches of Ngatana, Kulesa, Marembo, and those in upper Tana decided that they would be led by the Methodist Church. The churches of the Buu, Kalindi, and Lamu decided that they would continue with those who had brought the Gospel message, the Neukirchen Mission. In addition, it was decided that all the churches of Tana River could be visited and attended to by any able denomination that people were comfortable with, so that no mission could claim dominance over the area. The matter was highly divisive even on the international scene (Church Marked in History 2022). In 1947, the World Council of Churches (WCC) held a meeting in London. Surprisingly, the GNM was not invited to attend the meeting. Further, the meeting decided that the GNM would not be allowed to continue in its missionary activities among the Pokomos. It was this decision that further exacerbated tensions in Ngao. The following year, Rev. Simeon Ubo of Ngao sent away Rev. George Martlew when he came to meet the people of Ngao, claiming that Rev. Martlew came to meet the people without involving him. He also accused him and his mission of blocking the missionaries from the Neukirchen Mission from coming to Ngao to continue with their missionary activities.

Matters worsened since Rev. Martlew, who was the Superintendent of MMS, on returning to Ribe, closed all the Buu schools and also stopped all aid coming from the government. The Buu teachers were also suspended from service. As a countermeasure, the teachers under the leadership of the Young Buu association planned how to continue working with their people (Bonaya 1969). This was between August 1948 and July 1950. During this period, the Buu schools performed well in the national exams, contrary to government expectations, and many students from the Buu schools went to join Shimo la Tewa, Ribe, and other high-rated government schools. These results motivated people to send a delegation to the Ministry of Education and the government at large, complaining of the closure of the school and the other punitive measures.

Israel Gudina and Kaleb Madyawa led the delegation. These delegates came with the answer that the government had agreed to reopen the schools and reinstate the teachers. However, the churches were still far apart, and the rift was stifling progress. In 1950, the Lamu District Commissioner conducted a large meeting at Ngao to reconcile the leader of MMS with the local churches. It was agreed that (i) the Methodist missionaries

could start ministering in the churches that were founded by the Neukirchen Mission, (ii) the leaders of GNM denomination would work closely with their Methodist counterpart, (iii) the Methodists should not change from the course started by the Neukirchen Mission, (vi) Amos Chadhoru would assist as educational supervisor in lower Tana and (v) Ezekiel Jara would be transferred from Mazeras and work as assistant supervisor of education in upper Tana (Buya 2011).

By 1950, it was clear that in spite of the many resolutions on paper, the GNM churches would never trust the Methodist society. Between 1950 and 1960, the churches sought means to enable GNM to continue their work in Ngao. There was an effort to initiate a new denominational alliance by the name Tana River Independent Church. However, registration of this new denomination did not materialise, and Methodism was blamed for it as a sabotage effort. Former GNM missionaries continued to pay isolated visits. In 1984, Fritz Gissel and his wife, Hannah Gissel, visited Garsen and re-dedicated a new church building there following the destruction brought about by the floods of 1961. It was in 1967, however, that the GNM churches managed to join the Africa Inland Mission.

In 1970, Lisania Buya, who was by then an assistant education officer in the district, visited London for a one-year course at Nottingham University. While there, he visited some of the former GNM missionaries in West Germany. He learnt the details as to why GNM could not return to work in Ngao. Upon his return to London, he visited the AIM home office and narrated the ordeal of Ngao Christian village. A new chapter for Ngao had just started with AIM as the new partner. In 1972, Bishop Wellington Mulwa of AIC Kenya came to Ngao and laid a foundation stone for a new Church building in Ngao. In 1979, the church was officially opened by the second president of the country, Daniel Arap Moi (Tumaini 2025). Meanwhile, the old Ngao church, built by the GNM and taken over by MMS, was abandoned since the end of the Second World War. Today, it stands as an iconic reminder of the neglect, controversies, and anger that became associated with the Christianisation of Ngao Village.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to reconstruct the story of Ngao Christianisation, arguing that the African was not a passive recipient of the new religion amidst colonialism and inter-tribal conflicts. The story of Ngao Christian Village demonstrates that missionary Christianity in colonial Africa was neither linear nor uncontested. Rather, it was shaped by complex interactions between missionary societies, colonial authorities, and African communities.

Ngao was a contested religious and cultural space in which local actors actively negotiated and reshaped missionary influence. The marginalisation of the Neukirchen Mission in the writing of East African Church history highlights the need to broaden historiographical perspectives beyond dominant Anglophone narratives. At the same

time, contemporary debates over heritage preservation and restitution in Ngao underscore the enduring significance of this history.

More specifically, the article demonstrated that the present Ngao is still a contested space with a mixed heritage that sits in the nexus between European and African cultural identities, three major religions, and two World Wars. It relies on archival and oral history methods to periodise the story of Ngao into three main epochs: the missionary establishment period (1887–1914), the post-First World War period (1914–1940), and the post-Second World War period (1995–1964). There still exist clear gaps in the missionary literature of the East African region. Gitonga Kimani is right in observing that, in comparison to other missionary societies in Kenya, such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS), African Inland Mission (AIM), Holy Ghost Fathers (HGF), Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) and Church of Scotland Mission (CSM), the GNM has not been extensively studied (Kimani 2020). The reasons are partly political since there is circumstantial evidence, as demonstrated in this article, that GNM presence was highly curtailed on account of its association with Germany in spite of its great and admirable success at the Coast. Germany's influence on present-day Kenya is admirable and very visible (Gunther 2018). However, a gaze at the past may solidify those relations and create a great motivation to partner on various fronts. The people of Ngao have not relented in petitioning their governments to create more opportunities for them to reconnect with the German friends who left an unmatched influence on the community through various developmental initiatives. They enlightened the village transport system, educational and medical forms, and greatly enabled cultural and religious exchange.

Community efforts to reclaim Christian heritage and Pokomo identity have recently yielded to a conversion of the Missionary House into a community museum. It was opened by the National Museum of Kenya (NMK) on 6 September 2024. However, Pokomo elders' efforts to return the Ngadji, a sacred drum stolen by the British in 1902, have not materialised yet. On the contrary, the search for restitution has become a deeply divisive affair, both locally and abroad. These heritage objects, monuments, and graveyards remain poignant with cultural meaning, traditional usages, and difficult memories that define the Pokomo people. They speak to the underlying controversies between missionary societies, colonial powers, and various clan groups of the Pokomo. Nevertheless, these setbacks have not quenched the community's search for meaning and identity through heritage valorisation.

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