

Liberationist Icon or Conservative Leader? Ismael Mwai Mabiū's Afro-Pentecostalism and Ecclesiastical Leadership in Kenya

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Abstract

This article sets out to retrieve the oral histories of a pioneer African Christian at Kagumo Full Gospel Churches of Kenya (FGCK), namely Rev. Ismael Mwai-Mabiū. Mwai-Mabiū offered exceptional leadership as he sought to revive the Mount Kenya region and the entire Kenyan nation, particularly in the mid-1940s–1980s and 2000–2012, through his oral “liberation theological discourses.” These efforts were well captured in his preaching as a roving pastor in mass seminars and in evangelism. His Afro-Pentecostal theology, which he propounded in the FGCK (a church he co-founded), provided the forum that he used as a platform to launch and advance his liberationist Afro-Pentecostal approach. Was Mwai-Mabiū a liberationist or a conservative ecclesiastical leader in his theo-social doctrinal matters; or was he seeking to indigenise theological discourses in his Afro-Pentecostal outfit? The concern of this article is to unearth the nature of leadership that Mwai-Mabiū employed and to describe the relevance of his Afro-Pentecostal oral and liberationist theologies. What were his fundamental concerns? Was his “ministry” evangelised in a cultural vacuum, rather than an inclusive environment that relied upon already existing networks of the host area of ecclesiastical operation? The methodology of this article comprises interviews conducted in four phases: 1) with Mwai-Mabiū himself; 2) with his wife; 3) with three focus discussion groups (FDGs) in interviews between 2016 and 2018; and 4) by the researcher with people closely related to him, namely Bishop Joshua Kiongo Kimani, assistant Bishop Rev. Joseph Muriithi Karugendo, elder Joseph Munene, elder Benson Ngiri, and the pioneers of the FGCK. Later, in May to October 2019, the researcher conducted further research to seek clarification on some areas that did not come out clearly during the first interviews. A review of the relevant literature was also conducted.



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Keywords: Afro-Pentecostalism; Kenya; ecclesiastical leadership; liberationist Afro-Pentecostal approach; Ismael Mwai-Mabiu; Full Gospel Churches of Kenya (FGCK)

Introduction

The retired Afro-Pentecostal cleric, Rev. Ismael Mwai-Mabiu of Full Gospel Churches of Kenya (FGCK), is the subject of discussion in this article. Like others in the Afro-Pentecostal wing of evangelical Christianity in East Africa, and Kenya in particular, he sees glossolalia—the act of speaking in tongues—as a critical measure of being infilled by the Holy Spirit. Clearly, this is a common trend among all Pentecostals globally, and Afro-Pentecostals in Kenya are no exception. In turn, glossolalia is meant to show deep commitment in the Afro-Pentecostal faith; and indeed to demonstrate purity in place of lukewarm-ness, that he feared was ruining the mainline churches in his locality.¹ The concepts of “redemption” and “salvation” are of immense importance in doctrinal matters, as these terms denote the very core of the Christian faith, as Mwai-Mabiu’s discourse will attest.

Mwai-Mabiu, as will be demonstrated in this article, goes beyond the traditional parameters of Afro-Pentecostals and the evangelical wing of Protestant Christianity in general, when he embraces “oral liberation theology” of the masses. This drives him to embrace the social and/or holistic gospel, which is rather a liberal position, hitherto unknown in the Afro-Pentecostal and/or the larger evangelical Christian world. The question arises: Is he a liberationist icon or a conservative ecclesiastical leader? As used in Latin America, South Africa and North America in the 1960s during the heydays of political theology, the term “liberation theology” implies the theological moment; an experience of the Christian faith which seeks to consciously undertake the duty of transforming the world in designated situations, and urges dependency in the light of the gospel.

The charismatic leadership of Mwai-Mabiu (1939–2019) is of critical concern in this article; and as he co-founded and eventually led the FGCK at Kagumo, Kerugoya and other parts in the Kenyan territorial space, his influence has been felt right into the twenty-first century. Indeed, “Rev. Ismael,” as he is fondly called, was a household name in Kirinyaga, Nyandarwa, and Embu counties; and in other counties of central Kenya and Rift Valley, among other places.² Mwai-Mabiu navigated the theo-social-ecclesial terrain successfully together with two European women, who were known as the Raatikeinen sisters. Others were Alma, Eva and Pavo Kusmin, and his wife Vieno, all of whom came from Finland and the United Kingdom in the early 1950s.³ They were energised by the strong desire to evangelise the gospel world-wide. Curiously, those who came from London knew that King George VI, whose full name was Albert

1 Interview with other interviewees at Kagumo, Kianjege and Kerugoya, June–November 2016.

2 Interview with other interviewees, June–November 2016.

3 Interview with other interviewees, at Kagumo, Kianjege, and Kerugoya, February–September 2018.

Frederick Arthur George (1895–1952), would not have allowed the Pentecostalism ideology to take root as an alternative religion in the place of Anglicanism, which was the state church in the UK. Therefore, Alma and her sister Eva, and the Kusmin family, served under the auspices of the Pentecostal Assembly of Canada (PAOC), which in turn became Finland Free Foreign Mission (FFFM), then Fida International, and lastly the Full Gospel Churches of Kenya (FGCK) in 1962. Nevertheless, the FGCK was “founded in Kenya by Finnish missionaries in 1949 and is registered with the registrar of societies by that name.”⁴

The general history of the FGCK can be retraced from an account that was written by Anneli Jerkku, “A History of the Finnish Free Foreign Mission in Kenya (1949–1998.” In this publication, she addresses the FGCK in four sections: 1) its preparation period (1912–1948); 2) pioneer period (1949–1962); 3) development period (1963–1979); and 4) its consolidation period (1980–1998).⁵ However, she does not deal with the contribution of Mwai-Mabiu, who is the major concern in this article. In turn, it is worthwhile to appreciate that Mwai-Mabiu, who was born in 1939 in the present-day Kirinyaga County, first converted into the Anglican Christian faith in 1955.⁶ By then, the FGCK, which he pioneered in Kagumo-Kirinyaga locality, was not yet known in the late 1960s. Mwai-Mabiu was the sixth born in a family of seven, though the two first-born daughters and one son had died during their infancy. His elder brother, a Mau-Mau rebel (freedom fighter), died in 1953 after he was shot dead by King’s African Rifles (KAR),⁷ as the guerrilla fighters (Mau-Mau rebels) battled the conventional British colonial army (KAR) during the struggle for independence (1952–1960). The fourth born, a farmer, died at the age of 87 in 2009.

Topology

As noted in Gathogo,⁸ Afro-Pentecostalism is the brand of Pentecostal Christianity that consciously or unconsciously employs some elements of African culture, such as holistic living, some African idioms, proverbs, oral narratives, African hospitality and communality, among others. Generally, Pentecostal Churches are largely classified in the category of the new religious movements (NRMs) and are sometimes referred to as fringe religions, marginal religions, and alternative religious movements, among others. This, therefore, shows the difficulty in giving a precise definition of new religious movements (NRMs), as their diversity compounds the matter. Such deficiency in

4 David Maina Gikungu, “Dynamism in Church Governance with Special Reference to Leadership Conflict in the Full Gospel Churches of Kenya” (Nairobi: Unpublished MA thesis, 2007), 2.

5 Gikungu, “Dynamism in Church Governance.”

6 Interview with Mwai-Mabiu at his Kianjege-Kanyekiine home, 27 June 2018.

7 The King’s African Rifles (KAR) was a multi-battalion British colonial regiment raised from Britain’s various possessions in East Africa from 1902 until independence in the 1960s. It performed both military and internal security functions within the colonial territories, and served outside these territories during the World Wars.

8 Julius Gathogo, “Extremist or an Inculturationist? Retrieving Milkah Muthoni’s (1948–2009) Afro-Pentecostalism,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, May 40(1) (2014): 191–214.

definition has brought up three distinct approaches in seeking a proper term to define Pentecostalism and NRMs. First, NRMs are largely seen as cults, which are heretical from the perspective of traditional Christianity. Second, they are largely seen in evangelical circles as groups which have false teachings that do not conform to the orthodox-ical hermeneutics of the Bible. Hence, NRMs are commonly referred to as “cults” and are defined by James Sire as: “Any religious movement that is organisationally distinct and has doctrines and/or practices that contradict those of the Scriptures as interpreted by traditional Christianity, as represented by the major Catholic and Protestant denominations, and expressed in such statements as the Apostles’ Creed.”⁹

As noted in Gathogo, Roy Wallis’s (1984) typology classifies NRMs into three categories: a) world-denying or world-rejecting; b) world-indifferent, and c) world-affirming.¹⁰ Mwai-Mabiu’s oral “liberation theologies” are well captured in the categories of world accommodating and/or world affirming. In other words, Mwai-Mabiu believes that the world is not a wasted opportunity; and that it can be redeemed from her shortcomings. In so doing, he sees the gospel as the only way which offers the concept of “redemption and life”; a phenomenon where adherents achieve higher social acceptance and status in our realised eschatology (present concerns), and as they look forward to the unrealised eschatology (future concerns). Unlike most of the NRMs, and Afro-Pentecostals in particular, Mwai-Mabiu, unconsciously strikes a working chord with Max Weber (1864–1920),¹¹ who saw a positive contribution in religion, especially in his theory of “protestant ethic”—a phenomenon where religion encourages people to “work for their own salvation” in all spheres of life. Hence, unlike Karl Marx (1818–1883), who saw religion as “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions [and as] the opium of the people,” Weber saw religion as a very important tool of encouraging hard work and positive growth in society.¹² In other words, Mwai-Mabiu falls in Weber’s category; and in his more than half of a century’s ecclesiastical duties, he saw religion as a uniting and an empowering force in a holistic dimension. Was he ahead of his time, in a sea of NRMs who had no clearly defined theological positions and/or without any guiding theoretical framework? Certainly, being a “minority” in that school of thought ensured that his voice remained suppressed until the research and subsequent publication of this article.

Mwai-Mabiu’s Early Background

Mwai-Mabiu began to look after his father’s flock of sheep and goats at an early age of 10 years, until the entire family was forcefully put in the British concentration camp at Mutira, where we now have Mutira Girl’s High School. This event took place after the

9 James W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting* (New York: Intervarsity Press, 1980), 20.

10 Gathogo, “Extremist or an Inculturationist?”

11 For details see Julius Gathogo, *Whimpers of Africa: Lessons from the Kenyan Context* (Saarbrücken: Lambert, 2013).

12 Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion* (Mass: The Beacon Press, 1963).

erstwhile colonial Governor, Sir Evelyn Baring (1903–1973), declared a state of emergency in colonial Kenya on 20 October 1952. To this end, Julius Gathogo has noted that:

After the State of Emergency was declared, people of Mutira were put in villages. By June 1954, the [British] War Council took the decision to enforce villagisation throughout Kikuyuland, Mutira included. Villagisation means “the compulsory resettlement of people from their scattered, ridge-top farms, into centralized, regulated villages, situated at key points along the busier roads.”¹³ While some villages were principally meant to protect the loyalists, most of the 854 established villages or camps were in reality, mass detention camps intended to punish *Mau Mau* sympathisers. In turn, this negatively affected the trend in Anglican missions—as most of her members were the key targets and suspects.¹⁴

During those mass detentions, some died as a result of lockdowns, as supply in proportion to demand was no longer available. During the mass detentions of the 1950s, the colonialists put Kenyans in 854 compulsory villages to separate them from the freedom fighters, who were operating from the Mount Kenya forests. The fighters, who were loosely called Mau-Mau rebels, employed guerrilla warfare against the British government. Similar to the case of the Corona virus disease (Covid-19) in 2020, where the pandemic forced a lockdown, Kenyans in the central region ran short of food and other supplies, because the political lockdown hurt critical economic activities. Provisions such as medicines, food and good shelter, among others, became a nightmare. Following this was the declaration of a state of emergency and subsequent villagisation, where people were forcefully taken into the scattered concentration camps. Mwai-Mabiu’s family bore the brunt of these events, following the death of his mother in 1954, when Mwai-Mabiu was 15 years old. He was left with only their fourth-born sister and their lonely father, who jointly grappled spiritedly with these vicissitudes of life.¹⁵

Biblical excavation has shown that Abraham’s father, Terah, was an idol worshipper and, therefore, he was brought-up in similar ungodly environments; however, this did not blur his mission for his later journey of faith (Genesis 11). In comparison to the biblical Abraham, Mwai-Mabiu was born and brought up in a family where the father (Mabiu) was both a diviner and a medicine man, but God chose Mwai-Mabiu to become the great doyen of Afro-Pentecostal faith, and he went on to become the springboard of the FGCK in Kirinyaga county, Embu county and beyond.¹⁶ As it turned out, Mwai-Mabiu’s iconic status has been explained by his enormous wealth of experiences; a phenomenon which began by his undertaking of menial and/or humble jobs. In this

13 Caroline Elkins, *Britain’s Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), 294.

14 Julius Gathogo, *Mutira Mission: An African Church Comes of Age in Kirinyaga, Kenya* (Limuru, Zapf Chancery, 2011a), 50–51.

15 Interview with Mwai-Mabiu, 27 June 2018.

16 Interview with other interviewees, Kagumo, Kianjege, and Kerugoya, January 16 to 22 August 2017.

regard, Mwai-Mabiu ploughed with oxen from 1955–1964 before he left for Kericho, so as to look for greener pastures. At Kericho, he got employment as an urban council worker. Nonetheless, Mwai-Mabiu’s case is exceptional in that his original ancestral homeland (Njoga along Kabonge-Kiaragana) is not identified by his FGCK fraternity alongside the ones that he mentored. The failure to recognise his Njoga home is because he settled in other places within the Mount Kenya region and counties in the larger Rift Valley region, such as Rongai, Nakuru, Kericho, Kirinyaga and some parts of Embu county.¹⁷ He was, therefore, seen as a “missionary abroad” rather than a “parochial missionary.”

Certainly, his heydays as an evangelist-cum-preacher-cum-mass liberator show that he was largely embraced by a cross-section of the Kenyan populace, as being among the leading pioneers of the FGCK. By March 2020, then 81-years old, Mwai-Mabiu was living with his wife, Lusseta Muthoni Mwai, whom he had married in 1963, and who bore him two sons and seven daughters. One daughter has passed away, and the surviving six daughters and two sons are all married and living with their families. While shedding off patriarchal practices that kept clergy’s wives from church ministries, Mwai-Mabiu brought his wife to the fore; and together they ushered in the agenda of the FGCK to the heights of holistic growth. When the researcher and his assistants visited the family for interviews (on 27 June 2018), the couple looked energetic, happy, healthy, pensive and in a jovial mood throughout our stay in their compound.¹⁸ They were settled on a small farm at Kianjege, Kanyekini location, Kirinyaga central division, in Kirinyaga County of Kenya, whereas their offspring were scattered all over central Kenya and Rift Valley regions of Kenya, where they owned properties.¹⁹

Mwai-Mabiu’s Shift from Anglican to FGCK

A critical turning point in Mwai-Mabiu’s lifetime was his shift from the Anglican Church of Kenya to co-found the FGCK in the 1960s in Kagumo-Kirinyaga areas, covering the larger Kirinyaga Counties.²⁰ After his conversion in 1955, as an Anglican, he teamed up with Anglicans and the emerging Pentecostals (the Finnish missionaries in particular) to revive the spirituality of the area. Hence, his final shift from the Anglican Church to co-found the FGCK in his Kagumo-Kirinyaga area, in the late 1960s, was not seen as radical discontinuity but as a continuity of his usual duties.²¹ The unique thing here, is that the FGCK did not exist in his homeland; hence he was the one who moved all over Kagumo, Kerugoya, Riakiania, Kagio and other places evangelising and opening this seemingly strange Afro-Pentecostal faith in largely Anglican and Catholic zones. Eventually, this abandoning of the Anglican faith paid dividends when he was finally made an FGCK deacon in 1968 by pastor Ezekiel Kiptoo in Kericho, who

17 Interview with other interviewees, February–September 2018.

18 Interview with Mwai-Mabiu, 27 June 2018.

19 Interview with Mwai-Mabiu, 27 June 2018.

20 Interview with Mwai-Mabiu, 27 June 2018.

21 Interview with other interviewees, February–September 2018.

was the serving FGCK regional bishop in Kenya, by March 2020. In turn, the newly ordained Mwai-Mabiu of the FGCK resigned from the Kericho Urban Council, where he was working in 1971, to become a full-time church minister. Despite being poorly educated, he joined Koru Bible School, in Kisumu County, where he simultaneously did theological training, as he combined learning and serving the church. Following his relocation from Kericho headquarters, he eventually opened the first FGCK church at Londiani.²²

Of importance to note is that while still an Anglican adherent, in the late 1950s, he co-founded the FGCK together with some Europeans: the Raatikeinen sisters, Alma, Eva and Pave Kusmin, and his wife Vieno Kusmin, all from the United Kingdom and Finland under the auspices of the Pentecostal Assembly of Canada (PAOC). It became the Finland Free Foreign Mission (FFFM), renamed Fida International. Fida International was finally renamed the Full Gospel Churches of Kenya (FGCK). It was subsequently placed under the trustee of local Kenyan people, after it was registered by Kenya's "registrar of societies by that name."²³ Was he a double dealer? Certainly, this represents the most controversial part of his lifetime. Although, his dalliance with the Finnish Pentecostals who had visited his home area was initially meant for mere Christian revival, it may be deemed suspicious that he worked and/or teamed up with "strangers" without first resigning from the Anglican Church. Was he weighing his options, and does this affect his legacy as the pioneer leader of the FGCK in his locality? Or, did his "philosophy" of oral liberation theology for mass consumption drive him this far? Was he looking for an opportunity to take his liberating gospel through Afro-Pentecostalism?

Mwai-Mabiu's Afro-Pentecostal Theology

Mwai-Mabiu's FGCK theology is Afro-Pentecostal and resonates well with other related outfits in Kenya, such as "Mombasa Pentecostal Churches (MPC), Deliverance Church of Kenya (DCK), Jesus Is Alive Ministries (JIAM-Nairobi), Jesus Celebration Centre (JCC-Mombasa), Neno Evangelism Ministries, The Happy Churches, Faith Evangelistic Ministries, Jubilee Christian Centre (JCC-Nairobi), Christ is the Answer Ministries (CITAM-Nairobi), and the Winners Chapel International Ministries, among others."²⁴ Like in Mwai-Mabiu's FGCK outfit, they all emphasise not just the teaching and practice of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but also the power of speaking in tongues (glossolalia) as the key mark of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As Gathogo has noted, "a person who does not have the gift of speaking in tongues [glossolalia] is encouraged to pray for it plus other supernatural gifts such as prophesying, discerning and healing

22 Interview with Mwai-Mabiu, 27 June 2018.

23 Gikungu, "Dynamism in Church Governance," 2.

24 Julius Gathogo, "The Challenge of Money and Wealth in some East African Pentecostal Churches," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 37 (2) (September 2011b): 133–151.

among others.”²⁵ In the nature of things, Ogbu U. Kalu fittingly states that the major contribution of Pentecostalism to African Christianity is:

How they address the continued reality of the forces expressed in African cultural forms. Contrary to the early missionary attitude which urged rejection, Pentecostals take the African map of the universe seriously; accepting that culture is both a redemptive gift as well as capable of being hijacked.²⁶

In Mwai-Mabiu’s specific case, he advances an Afro-Pentecostalism ideology of oral “liberation theology” through his preaching and evangelism. By this Afro-Pentecostal liberating theologies, he offers counselling, teaching women couples, pastors, elders and shepherds (as a roving pastor), as he seeks to empower them for “self-liberation,” as he calls it. In the researcher’s view, Mwai-Mabiu’s empowering theology is largely a post-1988 retirement theology, though he claims to have engaged in it even before his retirement. Like Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educationist, he appears to prefer offering education for all philosophy, as a means of liberating the masses, and eventually takes the blessings to all. As noted in Gathogo, Freire propounded the view that “all people can learn, and therefore education should be for all; and dispelled the notion that the illiterate are too ignorant to learn.”²⁷

Apart from his pietistic stand, Mwai-Mabiu—like other Afro-Pentecostal leaders in the twenty-first century Kenya—has a penchant for new science and technology, which he sees as God’s vehicles for human salvation and growth. Hence, unlike his earlier stance in the twentieth century, his twenty-first century position is punctuated by a full embrace of science and technology, though under caution—as some youths may get misled by “extreme” societies. In his mass liberating education—that has been compared with that of Paulo Freire—Mwai-Mabiu seeks to accommodate the youth in his schema of liberation by embracing information communication technology (ICT). It is no wonder that there are pockets of his colleagues in the Afro-Pentecostal wing that have continued to resist science and technology, as they equate it with a deviation and/or “secularising” agent. By embracing everyone in his Afro-Pentecostal liberating theology, does he seek to re-interpret St Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:22, when he says: “To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some?” And can’t this compromise the church in some circumstances? Certainly, “pastoral education for all” has been his theo-ecclesial signature that befittingly underlines his ecclesiastical principles.

In Mwai-Mabiu’s ideology of oral liberation theologies, where he talks of “new ways of reading the scriptures” from the perspective of the poor, he focuses on the experiences

25 Gathogo, “The Challenge of Money and Wealth,” 138.

26 Ogbu U. Kalu, *Power, Poverty and Prayer: The Challenges of Poverty and Pluralism in African Christianity, 1960–1996* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2006), 118.

27 Julius Gathogo, “Steve de Gruchy’s Theology and Development Model: Any Dialogue with the African Theology of Reconstruction?” *STJ* 2019b, Vol. 5, No. 3, (2019): 307–328, 321.

of the socio-politically deprived, as well as the cultural and spiritually deprived. This makes him stand out uniquely amongst other Afro-Pentecostal leaders, and in the general history of African Christianity. Are Afro-Pentecostals changing their theological status quo in a radical way, a phenomenon where liberating theologies are now taken to the masses of people in the rural ghettos, and delivered orally? Mwai-Mabiu appears to have borrowed a leaf from liberation theologians of the 1960s and 1970s, who were committed to change the situation of oppression and commit the poor and weak to God's kingdom. This experience endears him to all people and interacts with worshippers from all walks of life. Ironically, liberationist theologians who could have influenced Mwai-Mabiu are largely in the mainline churches, and include: James Cone, Allan Boesak, Desmond Tutu, Manas Buthelezi, and Zablon Nthamburi, among others.²⁸ Did the otherwise "conservative" institution, Koru Bible School (Kisumu) for Afro-Pentecostals, offer liberal theological training for Mwai-Mabiu? Certainly not. In our interviews it became clear that his liberal and/or holistic theological position was a by-product of his broad interaction with leaders from other denominations, his rich Anglican background notwithstanding, and his reading culture.

The major inspiration to liberation theologies for Mwai-Mabiu has been the Exodus motif which focuses on freedom for the oppressed and suffering people; and where Moses emerged as the leader of the Hebrew liberation from Pharaoh's hands. At one stage, Moses had to tell Pharaoh: "Let my people go; so that they may worship God" (Exodus 9:1). In Mwai-Mabiu's case, he sees people in his Kenyan context as oppressed people who remained in bondage through the inherent sins of their fore-parents (Adam and Eve), and whose joys could be restored through his liberating mass oral theology. Nevertheless, there are those who have always viewed Mwai-Mabiu as a conservative; and indeed, the indisputable architect and pioneer of the FGCK at Kagumo, Kerugoya and other parts in the republic of Kenya.²⁹ By "conservative" we mean that some of our interviewees just saw Mwai-Mabiu from his earlier evangelical and/or rigid pietistic position that initially lacked an empowering and/or liberating voice. From our interviews with him, however, it became clear that he handles Afro-Pentecostal theology from an "oral liberating theological" perspective, a phenomenon that agrees with John Mbiti when he posits that the African context has a three-pronged theology, namely written theology, oral theology, and symbolic theology.³⁰ With oral theology being the message that targets the masses, the untrained readers of the Bible, the gospel artists, the African instituted churches and so on, Mwai-Mabiu (a non-writing oral theologian) takes his empowering theology to the masses. By March 2020, Mwai-Mabiu was tackling his mass Afro-Pentecostal theologies by addressing critical liberating themes such as marital challenges, overcoming ethnic bigotry, proper use of science and technology, self-liberation among the youths, empowering oneself through small skill

28 Julius Gathogo, "Black Theology of South Africa: Is this the Hour of Paradigm Shift?" *Black Theology: An International Journal*, UK, (BT 5.3), (November 2007): 327–354.

29 Interview with other interviewees, June–November 2016.

30 John Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: O.U.P., 1986), 46.

businesses, and the word of God as a liberative tool, among others.³¹ This oral liberative approach also sees him uniquely accommodating and dialoguing with the dissenting voices of other faiths, which unlike other Afro-Pentecostal leaders who are dismissive of others, is a unique approach. Nonetheless, he justifies it as the way to holistic growth of the body of Christ.

Some of our interviewees saw Mwai-Mabiu as a very strict ecclesiastical disciplinarian and a stickler to the Orthodoxy of the church of Christ universal, despite his supposedly conservative background.³² In our interviews, however, he strongly supported the idea of mega tent evangelism ministry, which provides room for mass pastoral education. He nevertheless noted the challenges therein, which he attributed to many logical considerations. Sometimes, such mega tent evangelism, he noted, lasted for three weeks, while some would take a whole month, depending on the local response and the circumstances in general.³³ We noted that he was a moderate cleric in the discharge of his pastoral duties, for we could gather evidence that he easily works and interacts with other priests from the mainline churches. In such situations, and unlike other Afro-Pentecostals, he could team up with non-FGCK in pulpit exchange, joint evangelistic missions, and in responding to matters of common concern such as liberating politics, good governance, and matters of development among the locals.³⁴ As noted earlier, this contrasts with the traditional norms of Pentecostal Churches, which view the mainline churches (the Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, etc.) as impure, not “saved enough,” and sometimes demonic.

The Use of *Kiroho* Song (Holy Song)

In his 2010 visit to the FGCK, Kagumo, where he was hosted by the Assistant Bishop, Joseph Muriithi Karugendo, the researcher observed that he began a “highly” touching spiritual (*kiroho*) song that says, *Ngai Wothingu wa Ibrahim* (the holy God Abraham listen to us), and everybody stood up ecstatically to join and sing in solidarity with him.³⁵ Certainly, the real spiritual and liberating father had visited the area, after which the “Holy spirit of God will take charge” as people later spoke in tongues as he led in mass prayer. Mwai-Mabiu then preached to an enthusiastic audience that readily answered him whenever he posed a question or whenever he said “Praise God!”

Secondly, the researcher noted the legacy of a man of God who had retired in 1988, but who remained influential and physically strong even after over 20 years of absence from conventional leadership. In a continent where people who led exemplary lives while on earth were believed to remain with the people as ancestral spirits, the reunion of Mwai-Mabiu with the FGCK Kagumo, which he had founded, was like a reunion with a long

31 Interview with Mwai-Mabiu, 27 June 2018.

32 Interview with other interviewees, February–September 2018.

33 Interview with Mwai-Mabiu 27 June 2018.

34 Interview with other interviewees, June–November 2016.

35 Material gathered through participant observation by the researcher who was an eye witness.

lost ancestor, as he was given critical attention hitherto unknown. Additionally, the limited speakers made generous references to him. In particular, the host, Bishop Joseph Muriithi who gave a key speech to welcome Mwai-Mabiu, reminded the congregation that one could not write the history of the FGCK Kagumo West-Jimbo and Kerugoya local Church Assembly without a reference to Mwai-Mabiu. He referred to him as a “great doyen of faith and undisputable architect of FGCK Kagumo, Kerugoya and other places in Kenya.”³⁶ Bishop Karugendo referred to him as a “father and great mentor” who nurtured him to the point of spiritual maturity; that eventually gave him the mantle of shepherding as a pastor, and later as the Bishop of Kagumo West Jimbo (region).

Besides the enthusiasm that greeted the *Kiroho* song and Mwai-Mabiu’s sermon, the general feelings of the congregation would tell you that worshippers had been awaiting a special guest preacher, whose word was to offer holistic liberation to them. In other words, the researcher followed up the after-church conversations that captured the underlying realities that eventually came out, as some talked of “breakthroughs” in their ailing bodies, marital issues, or indecisive matters that got instant solutions upon seeing, hearing and meeting the “father.” Certainly, that is a common characteristic among some Afro-Pentecostal outfits who equate their ecclesiastical leaders to a deity of sorts.³⁷ In the researcher’s observation, Mwai-Mabiu’s supernatural role could be seen, especially after the church service, where discussions and/or comments flowed smoothly as they enjoyed the church-provided cup of tea. The researcher, in his participant observation, was on the whole convinced that Mwai-Mabiu was the de-facto bringer of the incarnate Christ to the Church of God; and all that remained was for all the worshippers to ascend to the perceived paradise for crowning with or without change of their present bodies.

Conclusion and Analysis

From the outset, the article set out to retrieve the oral liberation theology of Mwai-Mabiu over the last 50 years (late-1960s to 2020). The article has demonstrated that unlike other leaders of NRMs and Afro-Pentecostalism in particular, Mwai-Mabiu was unique as he embraced interdenominational dialogue and interfaith relations. His coinage of oral liberative mass theologies is on par with other established theologians in Africa in both “the liberation trend (whose chief proponents included Allan Boesak, Jean-Marc Éla, Manas Buthelezi and Desmond Tutu, among others) and the inculturation strand (whose key figures included Mbiti, Nthamburi, Idowu, Pobee, Banana, Alward Shorter and Bediako, among others).”³⁸ The study has also established that Mwai-Mabiu’s ecclesiastical leadership is still revered, despite his retirement in

36 The material was gathered through participant observation, as the researcher was in this 2020 congregation of 2010, at FGCK Kagumo.

37 Julius Gathogo, “The Challenge of Money and Wealth in some East African Pentecostal Churches,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 37 (2) (September 2011b): 133–151.

38 Julius Gathogo, “Theological Education in the Tropical Africa: An Essay in Honour of Christina Landman and a Kenyan Perspective,” *HTS*, Vol.75, No. 1 (2019a): 1–9.

1988, as the 2010 event at the FGCK Kagumo local church showed. His method of moving across the Kenyan nation as he promotes mass oral theology of liberation in areas such as marital concerns, poverty concern, electoral justice, good governance, interfaith and interdenominational, spiritual liberation, self-liberation, among others, marks him as a unique Afro-Pentecostal leader, and in the NRM leadership in general. In other words, Mwai-Mabiu's more than half a decade's ecclesiastical leadership continues to impact on society, as his pioneering role in the FGCK, (especially in his Kirinyaga-Kagumo backyard of Kenya) now has several local churches of FGCK, which was certainly beyond his imagination 50 years ago (1970–2020). As he sought to open new centres in predominantly Anglican-Catholic zones, Mwai-Mabiu and his team must have appeared crazy.

With the rise of Afro-Pentecostalism as the dominant ecclesiastical model in the twenty-first century Kenya (as in the rest of Africa and Eastern Europe), one cannot fail to see Mwai-Mabiu's far-sightedness. Was he ahead of his time? As he ages graciously, and as he takes up his new role of a "roving pastor" since his retirement in 1988, Mwai-Mabiu's trainees-turned-pastors and bishops continue to shower praises on his pioneering role. Without his mentoring role, the FGCK would be non-existent in his home county of Kirinyaga County, and in the larger Kenyan state. Indeed, as noted in the introduction, the pioneer founders of the FGCK in Kenya (refer to Alma and her sister Eva and the Kusmin's family) came to Kenya from abroad under the cover of the Pentecostal Assembly of Canada (PAOC), which was later renamed Finland Free Foreign Mission (FFFM), then Fida International, and finally became the Full Gospel Churches of Kenya (FGCK) in 1962. While the years 1949 to 1962 were the pioneer years of the FGCK, 1963 to 1979 represented its consolidation period (1980–1998).³⁹ Mwai-Mabiu introduced the FGCK to his Kirinyaga area in the late 1960s during its consolidation period, and opened its first congregations after officially moving out of the Anglican Church in the late 1960s. It is also imperative to appreciate that while still in the Anglican Church (in the mid-1950s), he was teaming up with the pioneer European founders of the FGCK, especially in their evangelistic activities. In time, he became convinced that it was the FGCK which had a better chance of ushering in the much-needed revival that he so much aspired.

In our view, Mwai-Mabiu, in his ecclesiastical discourses, was paradoxically liberal and conservative at the same time. In other words, he was liberal in the sense that he was brave enough to deviate from the traditional Afro-Pentecostal understanding of pietism and conservative approach to religiosity as the only way to God. As evangelicals, Afro-Pentecostalism has characteristically tended to avoid "theological speculations, as a way of safeguarding the Christian heritage, and discourages anything that [appears to] threaten" its traditional patterns.⁴⁰ Additionally, the evangelicals have a tendency to believe in "the literal interpretation of the Bible, the importance of being 'born again'

39 Gikungu, "Dynamism in Church Governance."

40 Julius Gathogo, "The Quest for Religious Freedom in Kenya (1887–1963)," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, South Africa, XXXIV (1) (July 2008): 67–92, 80.

through Christ (cf. John 3), and strict adherence to the ‘great commission’” (Matthew 29:18–20).⁴¹ Though Mwai-Mabiu maintained some elements of the evangelical strands (especially the importance of being “born again”; the emphasis on speaking in tongues, which is purely for Afro-Pentecostals and not necessarily the larger evangelical house; repentance of sin; routine confessions, and so on), he was able to surpass this by ushering in the social dimension of the gospel that addresses self-liberation and economic empowerment, among other liberal concerns. Hence, he was both a conservative and a liberal Afro-Pentecostal leader of the evangelical wing of the Church in Africa; and this has huge lessons for the twenty-first century African Church.

Autobiographic Note

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41 Gathogo, “The Quest for Religious Freedom in Kenya,” 80.

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