

# *Initiation and Pastoral Psychology* by John Gathiga

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John Githiga's book, *Initiation and Pastoral Psychology* (2009), is an outcome of original research work that traces the foundation and background of the Gikuyu's initiation ritual in Kenya. The author defines initiation as a ritual practised not only by the Gikuyu (anglicised Kikuyu) community, but other communities of the world as well. That is, the Europeans, the Christians, the learning institutions, and the Islamic religions, among others. It is the graduation of a candidate from one level to another; a ritual that has been practised to accord the recruit with a sense of responsibility or duty to the respective community. It is thus meant to serve as a measure of proving one's maturity.

According to the Gikuyu tradition, those who go through initiation must first be trained—they go through a class session where they are taught communal values and Gikuyu customs. In this understanding, initiation may lack meaning if the men and women who spearhead the initiation have no knowledge of these values and norms. It is essential in that—though it is a traditional school of belief—it eventually imparts societal ethics, norms, values and goals that are considered as the vehicles that transmit culture from one generation to another. It brings families together for the sanctification of life, time and space.

In comparing the Gikuyu initiation and Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism), the Christian system has a believer who also goes through an initiation; that is, the stages of spiritual growth. These Christian initiation rites will depend on specific denominational beliefs. A case in point is the afro-Pentecostal settings or Pentecostals in general. The first stage is the conversion (one accepts Jesus as a personal Saviour); a phenomenon which is followed by the candidate being “filled with the Holy Spirit.” Subsequently, the new believer goes through the “new believer's class” and depending on the status of the believer, he or she joins specific groups and further training is given



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to edify and equip the believer. In all these levels, the candidate goes through initiation classes.

Looking at the Gikuyu customs and tradition, the community consists of three entities and these are considered paramount: the family, which brings those related by blood (*Mbari*); the clan, which brings several family groups together to form a clan (*Muhiriga*); and then the age group, which is formed during the initiation season. An adult Gikuyu man or woman who does not know where he or she belongs is considered an alien. It is done through several initiation levels that a Gikuyu person has undergone, a process which makes him or her a “complete person”; and by undergoing circumcision successfully, a Gikuyu initiate feels that he has closed the river of childhood and attained physiological and spiritual maturity, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o says in his famous novel, *The River Between* (1965, 31, quoted in Githiga 2009, 42); only then “the individual knows all the ways of the hills and ridges.”

According to Gikuyu beliefs, a child is born as a member of the community to contribute and draw from a mutual and inclusive society. This also resonates with the Jewish heritage, and especially when Jesus was born. He was born as a member of the community for a communal society (Luke 2:13–14). The societal decay that we experience today (as in the case of family break-ups, immoral behaviour and incest among families), is the result of a lack of training and counselling which have long been abandoned. With reference to Gikuyu initiations, the *irua*, which gives positive teaching about human sexuality, is accepted well by children, youths and adults. In the past, sex education was taught at an early age; however, this is lacking today. During the Gikuyu *irua*, sex education was done during pre-circumcision dances and even children learnt the names of all sexual organs and sexual behaviour. Today this kind of education is left to the parents, churches and teachers; and in reality it is hardly ever taught.

Githiga (2009) also takes us down memory lane. The coming of missionaries and the European “civilization” slowly killed some of Africa’s rich cultural practices which imparted very good morals to society. The Western worldview considered some of these African rituals as sinful paganism, and as a result, the African society slowly abandoned their rich culture. This acculturating (invading and conquering culture) group of Western missionaries then proceeded to teach the new African society in their schools or churches. It eventually killed the parental role in imparting moral education to their children; hence moral decadence took centre stage. Suffice it to say that, in Kenyatta’s religio-cultural book, *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), opposition to the abolition of circumcision by the colonial authority is made clear. Kenyatta says: “Circumcision is not just a matter of cutting the clitoris, but it has some other deep traditional, cultural and other religious connotations” (Kenyatta 1938, 28, quoted in Githiga 2009, 38).

The traditional Gikuyu senior advisors and sponsors (*Atiiri*) could go tirelessly beyond teaching their initiates and gave them what was referred to as “ceremonial sexual intercourse,” intending them to be aware of the world they were about to enter. The

twenty-first century is completely lacking such rich cultural encounters. Shyly, no parent, school teacher or church minister would dare to offer such teachings. Therefore, the young initiates have been left to the mercy of the wicked world.

Githiga (2009) climaxes his book by emphasising the importance of a Gikuyu *mwanake* (meaning my son, take the weapon). The young man was given a spear, a shield, and a sword. He was also provided with a sheep or a goat, which he used as a fee to enter the warrior regiment school, and even for sacrificing to God. This was provided for the security of the community, safeguarding them from external aggression and thus ensuring the harmony of the community. Other duties that a young married man was to perform was to cultivate the virgin land, plant men's produce like sugar cane, bananas, yams, and log trees. The young married women produced enough food for their family and had to ensure that they had a surplus. They had to make earthen ware like cooking pots and containers for alcoholic beverages, water and grain.

The book employs a traditional cultural (anthropological) approach to pastoral care to enhance and manifest respect for other people's world-view. The author attributes the secret of success for 50 per cent of marriages in the United States of America, by giving an example of a Kikuyu male, Francis, and his partner Janie, who were African-American anthropology students. After studying African-American anthropology, the discipline left Janie with respect for the symbols and rituals of her boyfriend's community, and she appreciated the logic of accepting dowry in the form of a token. The author propounds the view that initiation is a pillar through which the human life cycle and the embedded structure of human beings can be viewed. The author describes the case of Francis and Janie in the hope that the insight will equip and shed some light to everyone dealing with different ethnic groups, and would then extend their ego trajectories and enhance their self-identity.

The book climaxes by viewing symbols and rituals, and aids the reader to further explore the objective psyche as part of us. Put differently, the objective psyche appears in one's dreams, particularly when one is in dialogue or wrestling with a foreign world-view. In view of this, the author encourages the reader to view adolescence in physiological, psychological, sociological, and religious perspectives. For us to save our community and societal decay, stern measures and programmes should be implemented. Churches should come up with programmes to teach the youth and they should organise youth camps, rallies and weekly meetings. The youth (both sexes) should be taught sex education, gender social roles, and they must be trained to cope with the emerging needs and other social ills of the world.

Githiga's authoritative book is composed of 16 solid chapters which are thorough, comprehensive and informative. **Chapter one** deals with introductory information that connects the initiation ceremony as key moments in the rhythm of the corporate group of which the individual was part, and through this rite the living, the dead, and those yet to be born communicate for the wellbeing of the community. **Chapter two** deals with

the definition of the name, Gikuyu, which has been used for the ethnic group, language, country, and the founder of the Kikuyu nation of Kenya. The suitable and all-embracing term dealt with in this chapter is the Gikuyu word for the practice *Irua*, which like the Jewish circumcision, is merely bodily mutilation. The European missionaries branded female mutilation as a “brutal and barbarous custom” (Githiga 2009, 81) involving cutting off the labia minora and majora, which brought conflict among the Kikuyu, thereby distorting the real meaning of the practice.

**Chapter three** deals with Gikuyu initiation within the context of the totality of the Gikuyu life cycle, including: birth, marriage, middle adulthood, retirement, and death rites. The significance of *irua* lies in the fact that it exerts enormous influence on the Gikuyu personality from birth to death, and is a criterion for the burial rites. **Chapter four** deals with the conceptualising of the *irua* in light of what actually happens in the bodies of adolescents; referring to the transitional period between puberty and adulthood. **Chapter five** deals with the passage of Jesus, as delineated by the community of faith, in light of *irua* motifs. Just as the *irua* and the birth of a Gikuyu child, the birth rites of Jesus Christ included community, joy, thanksgiving and exaltation. Luke (2:13) writes after the birth of Jesus: “Suddenly there were heavenly hosts praising God saying ‘Glory to God’.” **Chapter 6** deals with the Gikuyu community aspects of personality and individuality as ritualised from birth to death. The Gikuyu person was born within a community to contribute to it and to draw from a mutual and inclusive society. **Chapter seven** deals with sexuality in a wider sense; to denote vital spiritual energy, which makes human persons long for bodily and emotional intimacy. However, the book emphasises that human beings are sexual persons and that sex is a gift of God.

**Chapter eight** deals with the division of labour for both genders and discusses how a modern professional and technical society is experiencing conflict caused by traditional and modern teaching regarding gender roles. Therefore, the division of labour explains our structured self with the understanding that we have a sphere that is unstructured, irrational, and chaotic—hence disorders. **Chapter nine** deals with *Maranja* dances in which people were free to dance the whole night away from their homes and express their opinions freely, provided they did not harm anyone. It highlights a scenario in St Pauls United Theological College where *Maranja*, a social evening, could be held for the tutors, students, college council, and the authorities. **Chapter ten** deals with the pre-circumcision dances that give the initiates unlimited freedom of expression and of being unstructured. The dances prepared the initiates for the actual day of operation when they were expected to control their feelings, emotions, and bodily expressions. This leads to real life and is meant for expression of both the rational and irrational self that leads to human personality. **Chapter eleven** deals with “lost-ness”; a notion of temporary confusion, conflict, disorientation, and pre-cariousness that the initiates undergo during the rites of passage. This bears the meaning of a Gikuyu word “*Gaturura*” meaning temporary blindness, which one experiences when lost for a while. The book poses a question on how we can allow the spirit of a formless and chaotic sphere, and therefore

expect the creation of order and unity. **Chapter twelve** deals with pain as a reality and the initiates were expected to confront pain with courage as an act of ritualisation which is inherent in the human life cycle.

**Chapter thirteen** deals with the definition of the term Gikuyu, which derives its name from the Mugumo tree. The book directs us to the myths which say that Gikuyu, the father of the tribe, emerged from the roots of the fig tree. To the author, thus, the genesis of the Gikuyu people is associated with the tree, which is termed the tree of God. The initiates are symbolically connected with the tree of God out of which Gikuyu, the founder of the tribe came. **Chapter fourteen** deals with the mythological Great Mother and the Great Father, as well as the assertion of the communal tree and the individual tree, which make us conscious of primordial time. This is the totality of the ontology and the complexity and ambiguity of our environment. **Chapter fifteen** deals with characteristics of a Great Father, the aspects of human nature which denote man, but which are also found in a fully functioning woman. The book explicitly demonstrates the attributes of the Great Father as being spiritualised on the actual day of circumcision in a structured and emotionless manner. **The last Chapter** deals with the summary of the book, which calls upon the counsellor to help individuals to face and learn to relate to the tree of God, the Great Mother, and the Great Father since the sanctification of life, and states that self-identity and integrity depend on how we relate to the great archetypal motifs of the psyche.

*Initiation and Pastoral Psychology* (2009) is a must read for all Africanist scholars, historians, theologians, psychologists, pastoral counsellors, inculturationist theologians, anthropologists, cultural students, policy makers and scholars of all shades. Post-graduate researchers will find it a necessary reading as it will shed light on how to document original data and convert the material into a book. As its blurb shows, “The Most Rev. Dr John G. Githiga is a highly respected scholar, published author, a true preacher of the Gospel, Patriarch of All Nations Christian Church International, Chancellor and Professor of Pastoral Theology at ANCCI University.” He is a former Chaplain and Adjunct Faculty at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas and Gambling State University, Louisiana and others. In writing this book, he has converted oral histories into written histories and eventually produced an authoritative book that will speak to the present and the upcoming generations.