

Anatomy of Beliefs and Practices of the New Jerusalem Church of Tongaren, Kenya

By

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Abstract

This article investigates the socio-religious transformations within NRMs using a case of TNJC in Kenya in the 21st century. This article contends that New Religious Movements (NRMs) are a major form of Christianity in Africa today. Kenya has a population of 47, 664,296 (State of Kenya Population Report, 2021) with a composition of 14.7% protestants, 23.4% Catholics, 11.9% Hindus, 11.2% Muslims, 1.6%, Atheists, and 1.7 % African Traditional Religionist (ATR). New Religious Movements (NRMs) have been confronted with rapid social and cultural transformations which have led to the rise of conflicts and struggles over collective identities. This case applies to The New Jerusalem Church (TNJC) founded in Tongaren, Kenya. The article sought to examine the religious belief system and practices of the New Jerusalem Church of Tongaren. The article was guided by the Social Movement Theory coined by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2004) to analyze the emergence, religious belief system, and practices of the New Jerusalem Church of Tongaren, between 2011 and 2023 in Tongaren sub-county Bungoma, Kenya. This was a qualitative study that adopted the exploratory cross-sectional research design. The target population was TNJC members and non-TNJC members of Tongaren, Bungoma County. Both primary and secondary sources of data were utilized to obtain information. Primary data was gathered from 22 key informants who were purposefully sampled for interviews and focus group discussions while secondary data was gathered from secondary literature in libraries. Collected data was analyzed through content and thematic analysis. The study established that TNJC members communicated their beliefs and practices through worship. Although Sunday is generally the day of worship for Christians, there are variations based on the practising denomination. The TNJC's theological practices were centred on visions, dreams, prophecies, and revelations. It was also revealed that Tongaren TNJC members dressed differently from other Christians. The way they dressed set their adherents apart from those of other denominations. All activities carried out by TNJC members were subject to predetermined guidelines involving the appearance of the Holy Spirit. The article recommends that Society should be aided in understanding other religions and their practices and belief systems because they inform their identity and give them a sense of belonging and history and hence help to prevent religious intolerance.

Keywords: Kenya, Church, Beliefs, Divinities, Spirits, New Religious Movements, The New Jerusalem Church, Tongaren

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1.0 Introduction

New Religious Movements (NRMs) are a major form of Christianity in Africa today. Kenya has a population of 47, 664,296 (State of Kenya Population Report, 2021) with a composition of 14.7% protestants, 23.4% Catholics, 11.9% Hindus, 11.2% Muslims, 1.6%, Atheists, and 1.7 % African Traditional Religionists (ATR). However, the total population identifying itself with New Religious Movements has not come out openly as they are syncretic between African religion, Christianity or Islam. Most of these New Religious movements occupy a peripheral position in Kenyan society and their religious functions are not well known as some focus on social challenges while others are political (Siavoshi, 2017).

Christianity was introduced in Kenya in 1844 by Johann Ludwig Krapf of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Krapf established a CMS station at Rabai, Mombasa (Owino *et al*, 2017). Due to the language barrier and influence from Islamic communities, Johann decided to move along with fellow missionary Johann Rebman into the interior parts of Kamba land and Taita. It was not until the 1870s after the conversion of freed slaves at Frere town near Mombasa that Christianity started spreading in the coastal parts of Kenya. After the 1970s, more New Religious Movements (NRMs) sprung among the Luhya and the Luo people of Western Kenya due to the post-colonial political, cultural and social crisis as well as the issue of struggle for enculturation of their African cultures (Nandi & Kima, 2015). In addition, their African desire for healing and helping fellow Africans to face real-life challenges became their motivation (Adogame, 2005). Such movements include the Nomiya Luo Mission founded by Yohana Owalo in 1914 which broke away from the Roman Catholic Church, the Roho Movement which was founded by Alfayo Odongo and split from Friends Mission in 1912, Dini ya Roho which was founded by Jacob Buluku and Daniel Sande which also broke from Friends Mission in 1927 (Akunda, 2010).

Other movements include the Legio Maria Movement by Luo Prophetess Aoko a splinter group of the Roman Catholic Church in 1963, the Africa Israel Church Nineveh which started under the foundation of Paul David Zakayo Kivuli and split from the Pentecostal Mission in 1942 (Nandi *et al*, 2015). Just like other parts of Kenya, NRMs have sprung up in Bungoma County such as the Lost Israelites Church of Jehovah Wanyonyi and TJNC of Yesu wa Tongaren. There is insubstantial information on the reasons for the emergence of these NRMs and their practices and belief systems. Therefore, this article presents a bid to find answers to the question of what are the distinctive beliefs and practices of The New Jerusalem Church (TNJC) of Tongaren Bungoma County. To answer this question, the article begins by analyzing the Luhya traditional worldview and examines the doctrines of the TNJC on the Supreme Beings, Divinities, Spirits, and ancestors. It also demystifies their beliefs and practices on matters of ecclesiastical attires and dressing, way and days of worship, baptism, and rites of passage.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

There is scanty information on the factors responsible for the emergence of these NRMs in Kenya and their distinctive beliefs and practices. This article attempts to answer the question; what are the motivations for the formation of NRMs in Kenya in the 21st century? The study took the case of the New Jerusalem Church (TNJC) which emerged in 2011 with an overall objective of investigating the socio-religious transformations of NRMs in Kenya in the 21st Century. Specifically, this article sought to fill gaps of knowledge on the distinctive beliefs and practices of TNJC of Tongaren and the socio-religious transformation of TNJC between 2011 and 2023.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The specific objective of this article is to examine the religious belief system and practices of the New Jerusalem Church of Tongaren.

1.3 Relationship between TNJC and the Luhya indigenous worldview

A worldview is a fundamental cognitive orientation of an individual or society encompassing the whole of the individual's or society's knowledge and point of view (Kurka 2004). A worldview can include natural philosophy, fundamental, existential and normative postulates, or themes, values, emotions and ethics. One important trait of TNJC is its insistence on bringing forward a Christian church based on a Traditional Luhya outlook. This church is well known for its incorporation of both the Luhya and the Christian culture. According to Wekesa, the TNJC spiritual way of life is informed by the Bukusu worldview which is incorporated into their beliefs, teachings and doctrines.

The Traditional Bukusu culture is a strong part of their teachings, and they are adaptable enough to meet their needs. They have a different understanding of phenomenal happenings such as forces of evil, spirits, their rites of passage and their way of worship. However, as they hold onto their beliefs and practices their Christian faith is upheld. The church has experienced rapid growth into different regions within the same locality due to its ability to bring people closer to God through preaching relevant messages that meet the people's needs. According to Mokhoathi (2017), the African worldview should be respected and the gospel should be explained in words that the populace can comprehend.

The members of the TNJC practice a brand of Christianity that is consistent with their own historical background and distinctive cultures. This has resulted in a richer world with social institutions, nature, objects, other people and spirituality. TNJC worldview is based on different themes such as the Supreme Being, belief in Divinities, belief in Spirits, belief in Ancestors, magic and witchcraft and rites of passage.

1.4 Belief in Supreme Being in TNJC

In Africa, there is a widespread strong belief in a Supreme Being, God. African societies are rich in the awareness of a Supreme Being to the extent that no native-born African is unaware of the supreme Being's existence (Olumbe, 2008).

Among the Bukusu, the Supreme Being, Were, is the Creator of everything and Sustainer of life. This concept of God as a Creator across African is explored by Mbiti (2004) who describes God as Excavator, Cleaver, Moulder, Carpenter, Originator and Begetter to define his creative power. In the Bukusu religion, God is revered as omnipresent. Thus, they say

'He is like air', 'The One who sees everything' and 'He who is met everywhere' (Olumbe, 2008). Though the above statements attest to God's omnipresence, it is noted that in the everyday life of the Bukusu people, there is a very strong belief that God is much closer to man and earth but not further away from the heavens. Due to this fact, He is hence considered a "Terribly remote God" by Africans (Donovan 2019). 'God's terrible and remote' nature emanates from various myths among the Bukusu community about how God got angry and left the earth for the far heavens after man disappointed him. This angry nature is seen during thunderstorms. He is therefore distinctly removed from the daily affairs of this world. However, due to his caring, forgiving and loving nature, He can be approached any time one is faced with a challenge and tribulation (Namulunda, 2011).

Another attribute of the Bukusu religion God is that he is Omnipotent and all-powerful. All majestic deeds, such as earthquakes and rain, are attributed to Him. Namulanda argues that the Bukusu claim that He is the One "who roars so that the nations be struck with terror" Furthermore, God is seen as the Provider; the one who provides rain to enable people to farm and animals or wild fruits for food and life.

God is also considered as Omniscient and All-Knowing. Therefore, nothing happens without his knowledge. As a way of appreciating Him, humans are expected to worship him through sacrifices and offerings (Namulunda, 2011). There is also the belief in many gods and spirits who are lower than and subservient to the Supreme Being. The nature of God in the Bukusu religion is the same as that of TNJC. The two religions are in agreement that, God manifests in every aspect of any member of TNJC's life. Just as the Bukusu believe in one Supreme Being (God), TNJC members describe God as being Omnipresent, Omniscient, benevolent, merciful, Father, eternal, creator who was not created (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). The ideas and convictions of TNJC members regarding God are reflected in His names, traits, deeds, and character, which are aspects of the Bukusu traditional religion. Sumbayi a member of TNJC claim that:

Our leaders were called by God and this should be able to show how strongly we believe in Him and how special our connection with Him is (Sumbayi, O. I, 2022, June 9).

The founders of TNJC assert that they were chosen by God to lead the church (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Wekesa, the TNJC of Tongaren, asserts that despite the usage of masculine metaphors in portraying God and the theology of the Godhead, which holds that there are three individuals in the Godhead- God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit- the problem of God's gender has no bearing. The TNJC members, like the Bukusu, referred to God in a general way that had no gender implications, indicating that God is thought to be both male and female because "transcendent beings have no partial gender but are complete" (Nganga, 2018). The fatherhood of God, according to TNJC, does not refer to human dads, but rather to God the origin of all beings.

1.5 Scriptures of the TNJC

Scriptures refer to sacred texts that are considered to be divinely inspired or revealed in various religious and spiritual traditions (Boyd, 2023). These texts contain teachings, stories, and insights that are believed to hold important spiritual and moral truths. Unlike the Bukusu religion which relied on oral traditions, the TNJC relies on the bible as their scripture. The Bible is a collection of religious texts that are considered to be sacred in Christianity. It is composed of two main parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament consists of 39 books that were written before the birth of Jesus Christ and primarily focus on the history and beliefs of the Jewish people. The New Testament consists of 27 books that were written after the birth of Jesus Christ and focus on his teachings, life, death, and resurrection.

Every TNJC member values the Bible much and views it as the foundation of their faith. Their manner of life is greatly influenced by the Bible. The TNJC in Tongaren holds the Bible in such high regard that, contrary to what Wekesa claimed, it does not suffice to simply call it the book of God:

The word of God is the way, the truth and the life. It is very paramount in our Christian life especially how it provides relevance to our beliefs and practices. It is our shield, defender and protector. Everything we do we find the guidelines in the Bible. Especially the Old Testament. It gave the Israelites guidelines on how they were supposed to live in all aspects of life. Be it circumcision, marriage, way of worshipping God, code of dressing for all genders and so forth (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Wekesa, the founder of TNJC, delved deeply into the Bible and spent years seeking its wisdom (Kataka, O.I, 2022, June 9). Since the organization's founding, TNJC members have gathered once a week to pray and read the Bible. The members of this congregation must adhere to all laws and teachings that are supported by biblical references. The books of Leviticus and Numbers are the primary sources for all the laws and restrictions that TNJC members in Tongaren follow, including what to eat and what to avoid. For instance, according to Numbers 6:5-7, this congregation was not permitted to shave their heads or their beards, which is consistent with the regulations that God gave the Israelites. 'The Bible says' or 'God says' is used as a punctuation in most of their sermons, hymns, and testimonies because of this. To "establish a Biblically based religious tradition" (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9), TNJC strives to adhere fully to Biblical teaching. Their fundamental basis for the majority, if not all, moral principles that guide their belief in revelation is the Bible.

Every time TNJC members encountered a theological problem, particularly one that ran against their traditions and beliefs, they unanimously looked to the Bible for answers. For instance, they cited Scripture when providing precise instructions on spiritual subjects. It should be noted that the TNJC leader used the Bible to resolve several contentious issues that the early church faced. These included the custom of growing beards and not shaving hair. As directed in Numbers 6: 2–10, early church members did not shave or trim their beards. Members of the TNJC steadfastly cling to the Bible as the fount of all wisdom. Nothing is practised by them that is not derived from or cannot be found in the Bible. Consequently, the Bible has been used to evaluate every part of their beliefs. They held that the Bible is another way that God

communicates with His people in addition to dreams and visions (Wekesa, O.I 2022, June 9). It should be highlighted that the Bible is the major source of the moral principles that guide TNJC members' way of life. It is undeniably a source of power; and those that adhere to its advice the most benefit from it. In support of his assertion of its significance to the faith, Ndung'u (2000: 236-247) notes:

... The Bible is used as though it transmits some mystical power which makes things happen....the Bible is treated as though it transmits a power responsible for the suffering the person is experiencing. The Bible is more than a text; it is a 'religio- magical symbol of God's presence and power..

The TNJC leader is convinced that, with the correct faith and mediation, what the Bible describes as having occurred in the past can happen again now. It is important to emphasize how the Bible and the Bukusu worldview are related to one another. Traditional Bukusu religion has parallels in TNJC Christianity, which emphasizes its oneness in the universal appeal to the spirits that underlie all of nature's powers. Because they could "hear and see a confirmation of their own cultural, social, and religious life in the life and history of the Jewish people as portrayed and recorded in the pages of the Bible," as Mbiti (2003) writes, TNJC adherents as well as other African communities readily absorbed the Bible. The Old Testament teaching was a major source of inspiration for the TNJC leader for the same reason it spoke to many of the values that were crucial to an African way of life. This was amply demonstrated by "the importance of fertility and sexuality, the place of ancestors, polygamous practice, the importance of land and a host of other cultural and religious similarities" (Robert, 2009; Clark, 2006:5; Simwa, 2015).

The Bible is not viewed by TNJC as only literary works but rather as theologically the subject of God. They perceive the Bible to be 'God's existence taken for granted and tied to how the world came into being, what went wrong with it, and God's plan for its eventual reconstruction and salvation' (Powell, 2012). Wekesa trusts the Bible to be "a normative standard for the faith, practice, and their worship" because he believes it to be a continuing truth (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Thus, Mikaili a church leader claims:

The Bible became the foundation for comprehending God's character and requirements, and as a result, its interpretation became an important aspect of this church (Mikaili, O.I, 2022, June 9).

He further claims that he will create the third testament to supplement the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, during his sermon, some of his adherents record his teaching which will be used to create the third Testament (Mikaili, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Wekesa has disciples whom he calls 'human angels' who help him in writing scriptures that will be published soon (Wekesa, O.I, 2023, January, 2). The aim of writing these scriptures is to keep a record of Mwalimu's daily activities, endeavours and actions. Mwalimu calls the scriptures *Agano Jipya Safi* meaning A New Testament that is Clean (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). The name of this Testament was allegedly revealed to him by God through a vision. The *Agano Jipya Safi* is regarded continuation of the New Testament of the Bible.

1.6 Belief in Divinities in TJNC

Divinities (*Abenami*) are supernatural beings or deities that are worshipped or revered in TNJC. They are often associated with specific aspects of nature or human experience and are believed to possess great power and wisdom. African religions partly recognize a group of being popularly known as divinities. These beings have been given various names by various West African writers such as 'gods', 'demigods', 'nature spirits', divinities, and the like (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010). Mbiti explains that the term "covers personification of God's activities and manifestations, the so-called 'nature spirits', deified heroes, and mythological figures" (2003). This belief in divinities is a common phenomenon, especially in the Bukusu culture where the concept of 'divinities' is clearly expressed, as there are so many divinities. Mbiti (2003) has that there are as many divinities as there are human needs, activities and experiences, and the cults of these divinities are recognized as such.

In African communities, there are two major groups namely: the Principal Divinities and Minor Divinities. Principal divinities are regarded as part of the original earthly things. (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010). They include such divinities as thunder divinities and earthly divinities, solar divinities, rain divinities, and fertility divinities. Others also have divinity associated with death. The Bukusu believe that all these divinities were created by the Supreme Being. Mbiti, (2003) explains that in Africans, divinities:

They have been created by God in the ontological category of the spirits. They are associated with Him, and often stand for His activities or manifestation either as personifications or as the spiritual beings in charge of these major objects or phenomena of nature.

According to Mbiti's explanation, the African communities Bukusu included believe that these divinities are under the Supreme Being in the order of things. They can also be seen as manifestations of the characteristics or attributes of the Supreme Being. Similarly, this school of thought resembles the TNJC claim that God created the universe and all its creations for the benefit of humanity. Hence, the divinities are brought into being to serve the will of the Supreme Being. Wekesa argues that:

Rainfall, thunderstorm, were brought out into being so that God can profess his powerful nature to human beings. All these things are created to benefit human creatures and animals concerning the divine ordering of God (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

This view of Wekesa however, rejects the notion of the divinity of Jesus Christ being created. For TNJC members, they believe that 'Mwalimu' (Jesus Christ) was not created but came out (brought forth) from the Father and so shares almost all the attributes of the Father. It is in this regard that he is considered as a deity. This is why he is called the Son of God.

1.7 Belief in Spirits in TJNC

The term "spirits" can have a variety of meanings depending on the context in which it is used. In general, spirits are believed to be non-physical entities that exist in a realm beyond the

physical world. The belief in spirits is found in many cultures and spiritual traditions throughout the world, and they are often associated with supernatural or paranormal phenomena. Africans believe in, recognize and accept the fact of the existence of spirits, who may use material objects as temporary residences and manifestations of their presence and actions through natural objects and phenomena (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010). They further note that this does not however imply that, traditional religion in Africa was an alienation in which “man felt himself unable to dominate his environment, in the grip of ghosts and demons, under the spell of the awe-inspiring phenomena of nature, a prey to imaginary magical forces or cruel and capricious spirits”.

Among the Bukusu traditional religion, the various forms of spirits separate the category of beings from those described as divinities. They are considered powers which are almost abstract, as shades or vapours which take on human shape; they are immaterial and incorporeal beings (Namulunda, 2010). As immaterial and incorporeal, they can assume various dimensions whenever they wish to be seen. The Bukusu believe that spirits are created by God but differ from God and man. Man has on various occasions addressed these spirits anthropomorphically by attributing human characteristics such as thinking, speaking, intelligence and the possession of power which they use whenever they wish.

TNJC members believe that spirits are what remains of human beings and animals when they die physically although they were created by God. This group of Christians believes that both human beings and animals have souls and spirits which continue to live with the spirits of dead men after they die. In this way, the world of the spirit is a picture of the material world where humans and animals live. These spirits do not possess material bodies through which they could be seen but they may incarnate into any material thing to make themselves seen for any reason or purpose (Namulunda, 2011). People have however experienced their activities and many folk stories in Africa tell of spirits described in human form, activities and personalities, though sometimes, these descriptions are exaggerations created by the elders to teach special lessons. Since they are invisible, these spirits are thought to be ubiquitous, so that a person is never sure where they are or are not.

Spirits are a common fundamental belief among the Bukusu people of Tongaren in Bungoma County. It is a common belief that the existence of a person continues after death; he or she becomes a spiritual being and acquires characteristics of immortality and eternity. According to the Bukusu, there are different categories of Spirits. There are evil spirits, good spirits and the Holy Spirit (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

1.8 The Evil Spirit

The New Jerusalem Church of Tongaren (TNJC) is a Christian denomination that emphasizes Christian teachings and beliefs. In Christianity, there is a belief in the existence of evil spirits or demons, which are seen as spiritual beings opposed to God and His will. Christianity teaches that evil spirits are fallen angels who rebelled against God and were cast out of heaven. These spirits are considered malevolent and are believed to seek to deceive, tempt, and cause harm to individuals. Within the TNJC, as with most Christian denominations, the focus is on the power and victory of Jesus Christ over evil spirits.

The teachings and practices of the TNJC typically emphasize prayer, faith, and reliance on God's protection and deliverance from evil. Members of the TNJC would likely be taught to

resist and overcome evil spirits through prayer, spiritual warfare, and adherence to Christian principles. The focus is on the authority and power of Jesus Christ to overcome the influence of evil spirits and to provide protection and spiritual strength.

Evil spirits (Ebisieno) are considered unclean spirits, impure spirits, deceiving or lying spirits, and demonic spirits that work against God (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010). Among the Bukusu, the spirits of witches are never supposed to acquire the status of ancestral spirits. Witches are believed to be evil people by nature; hence they automatically become evil spirits. Witches who die are said to wander and reincarnate into dangerous animals like hyenas (Phiri, 2010). The Bukusu believe that the spirits of living human beings can be sent out of the body on errands to create havoc on other persons in body, mind or estate. These actions are performed by witches who are known to have guilds or operate singly. The spirits perform different tasks and can act either invisibly or through a lower creature an animal or a bird. The spirits of witches from this community meet regularly for their ceremonies in forests, on trees or under trees at night (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). However, Wekesa abhors witchcraft and their actions. He notes:

Their main aim has always been to cause havoc on other human beings. All witches should be burnt. No one should be spared. It is such a barbaric act to cause suffering to a fellow human being (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Members of TNJC led by their founder *Yesu wa Tongaren* believe that witchcraft must be tackled with the understanding that the Great Commission directs Christians to discipleship so that they can grasp the new life they live in Christ. Hence, with the understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit, they clearly understand the manifestation of evil spirits (Acts 16:16-18) through the power of discerning. *Yesu wa Tongaren* therefore claims he has a difficult task as far as dealing with witchcraft is concerned. His main mission is therefore first leading people to acknowledge the manifestation of the Holy Spirit and God in their lives. Wanjala a member of this movement agrees with the views of their founder by making the following claim:

Everyone who receives the Holy Spirit and is ready to acknowledge God automatically becomes a child of God who has the power to set people free from any form of captivity (Wanjala, O.I, 2022, June 9).

No matter how deeply someone might be involved in witchcraft, confessing Jesus as their Lord and Savior is their only key to true salvation. These spirits will seek amends and payments for the injustice from the guilty parties. The members of TNJC believe that an angry spirit can cause very serious quarrels within a family, misfortune, and loss of property, wealth or life. Wekesa concludes by saying that, "...the fear of making a spirit angry can act as a sanction for ethical behaviour ensuring social harmony" (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

According to members of TNJC, Spirits whether good, evil, tribal or ancestral do not have any family or personal ties with human beings, and so cannot be regarded as the living dead. Intrinsically, spirits are strangers, foreigners, and outsiders in society (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). TNJC members believe that angry spirits cause terrible harm to men such as madness, epilepsy and other terrible sickness.

1.9 Good spirits

Among the Bukusu, good spirits are those which are directly concerned with the welfare of the living. They act as guardian angels, being active in the day-to-day activities of their people. Just like Mbiti (2003) good spirits “are guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities.” It is commonly believed that the good spirits of good people live in the spirit world with Were/Nyasaye. Just like the indigenous Bukusu religion, Barasa a member of TNJC, believes that:

The spirits of good people reincarnate into harmless animals or humans (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

1.10 Belief in the Holy Spirit by TJNC members

In Christianity, the Holy Spirit is considered to be the third person of the Holy Trinity, along with God the Father and God the Son (Jesus Christ). The Holy Spirit is believed to be a divine and eternal presence that works within the world to bring about God's will and to guide and empower believers. The TNJC believes in one God who is three entities in one, God the Father, God the Holy Spirit and God the Son (Yesu wa Tongaren). The concept of the Trinity among the TNJC manifests Yesu wa Tongaren as the incarnation of God. They claim that the three are united in essence but distinct in person about God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. Hence, it is held that Eliud has two natures: the divine nature and the human nature since he is both God and man (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). The Holy Spirit is the second person in the Holy Trinity who comes between God the Father and *Mwalimu*. The TNJC Christians assert that they look to the Holy Spirit for direction and counselling. Although the idea of the Holy Trinity is shared by all Christians, many churches, including TJNC, disagree with how the Holy Spirit expresses Himself (Uzukwu, 2012).

After one believes, confesses sins, and repents, they must be immediately filled with the Holy Spirit to be considered a legitimate member of TNJC. Members of TNJC believe in the presence of the Holy Spirit, whose expression can occasionally take the form of bodily manifestations like speaking in tongues and ecstatic prophecy. They view the Holy Spirit as a dynamic energy that supports Mwalimu in his ministry rather than as a passive entity. While upholding their distinctly African worldview, TNJC devotees frequently talk in tongues in divine languages that the listeners are unaware of. Their faith is founded on the conviction that the Holy Spirit works, endowing people with the ability to resist sin and temptation and live morally upright lives (Kataka, O.I, 2022, June 9). The TNJC in Tongaren firmly believes that each of its members is spiritually inspired and that they have a person named "Mwalimu" who can speak with God and the spiritual world directly and interpret visions for them (Topistar, O.I, 2022, June 9).

When under the influence of the Holy Spirit, some people experience ecstasy and make statements that other people may not understand (Makona, O.I., 2022, June 9).

The Holy Spirit convicts people of sin, reveals the truth from the Bible, and bestows blessings on them in the form of knowledge, wisdom, prophecy, preaching, speaking in tongues,

interpreting tongues, and healing (Uzukwu, 2012). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit bestows on people the fruit of love, goodness, patience, joy, and faith (Kataka, O.I, 2022, June 9). Thus, one of the distinctive features of TNJC in Tongaren is the belief in the Holy Spirit, which is strongly evident as being essential to their worship. Indeed, Legio Maria, Dini ya Roho, and Nomiya Luo are Spirit movements, (Park, 2010) as is TNJC. This concept of the trinity can be depicted in their prayers as follows:

God our Father, God the Holy Spirit, God the Son have mercy on us (Baba Mungu, Baba Roho Mtakatifu na Baba Mwalimu tuonee huruma), (Topistar, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Indeed, the Trinity's active, present, and working organ in the TNJC is the Holy Spirit. This is due to TNJC's belief that the trinity's creatures play various roles at various points in history. According to Wekesa, O.I. (2022, June 9), the TNJC hold the view that God the Father closely cooperated with the patriarchs Abraham and Moses, just as He does with His son Yesu wa Tongareni in the early church. The TNJC consistently emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is active today, especially in their songs.

When the power of the Holy Spirit overtakes a person, they lose control and roar like lions, according to certain TNJC members (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). According to Kataka, the Holy Spirit is like an item of clothing to a follower that they cannot live without. The Holy Spirit covers a believer's life in a similar manner as how clothing does (Kataka, O.I, 2022, June 9). However, the Holy Spirit leaves a sinner naked as soon as he sins. Therefore, none of the TNJC's members can endure without the Holy Spirit (Topistar, O. I, 2022).

To be baptized, for instance, one had to begin sincere prayer until the Holy Spirit revealed his baptismal name. The TNJC holds that the Holy Spirit speaks to them immediately, gives and renews the believer's strength, and leads him to eternal life. Similar to this, they acknowledge and declare the role of the Holy Spirit as the driving force behind spectacular acts performed by prominent prophets and inside the church (Ibid). As was previously noted, the Holy Spirit frequently makes an appearance when singing, dancing, and praying as revealed by prophets or prophetess. In response to the query about the appearance of the Holy Spirit, one respondent made the following observation:

The Spirit reveals Himself to prophets. He may reveal what regalia one needs to wear and the colour, dress, birth and baptismal name, marriage partners, as well as warnings on impending dangers or occurrence of disasters like sicknesses, floods, earthquake, drought and famine (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Given the foregoing, TNJC's awareness of the Holy Spirit also explains their decision to dress in religious garb, which represents reverence to the Lord (Ibid). It should be noted that the TNJC considered the Spirit to be a person even if they avoided using language to describe Him. According to Pfeiffer (2007), "He is addressed as a personal divine being and not as an impersonal manipulated being." TNJC holds a firm belief in the presence of both good and evil spirits by Ephesians 6:12, which states, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual

wickedness in high places." While evil spirits are thought to be rebellious to God and under the power of Satan, who leads organized hordes of wicked spirits and inflicts and even possesses individuals to cause bodily and mental disease, good spirits are allegiant to and obedient to God. The operations of TNJC are guided by the Holy Spirit, not by any human being (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

In TNJC of Tongaren, the focus is primarily on Christian teachings and beliefs, which emphasize the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. Christianity teaches that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity and is seen as the divine presence of God in the world and the lives of believers on the positive influence and work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is believed to guide, empower, and transform believers, helping them to grow in their faith, understand God's word, and live according to Christian principles. Members of the TNJC are likely encouraged to cultivate a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit through prayer, worship, and obedience to God's teachings.

The Holy Spirit is seen as a source of comfort, wisdom, and spiritual gifts that enable believers to live a godly and fulfilling life. Additionally, within the TNJC, there may be an appreciation for positive spiritual experiences, such as experiencing God's presence, divine interventions, answered prayers, and spiritual gifts like healing or prophecy. These experiences are often attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. It is important to note that while the TNJC may focus on the positive aspects of the Holy Spirit, it does not promote or encourage the worship or veneration of any spirits or entities other than God. The emphasis is on the worship of God through Jesus of Tongaren and the empowerment and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In conclusion, it is undeniable that the Holy Spirit is indispensable to the TNJC community in Tongaren. It is highly acknowledged, understood, and appropriated that the Spirit's functions exist. This church offers a celebratory faith that is distinguished by the use of spiritual music, dancing, and vigorous drumming. It is thought that these practices call forth and stir the Spirit's presence and actions, which lead to healing, prophecy, and the direction and guiding of the entire movement. Because of the TNJC's propensity for spirituality, they were practically forced to accept the designation of "spiritual" (Roho) church, which they still bear today (Park, 2010). This is why the Holy Spirit is revered in TNJC as the ultimate initiator, reviver, and revealer as well as the teacher, supervisor, and source of life, salvation, and all spiritual and physical well-being of the church and its adherents, and most importantly, the driving force behind this church's phenomenal growth.

1.11 TNJC Understanding of Jesus

The Christian belief in Jesus Christ is a central figure. He is considered to be the Son of God and the Messiah. According to Christian belief, Jesus was born in 4 BC in Bethlehem to the Virgin Mary and was raised in Nazareth. He began his ministry at around the age of 30 and preached about the kingdom of God, performed miracles, and gained a large following. Members of TNJC do not believe in the Jesus of Christianity but in Eliud Wekesa as their saviour and Messiah. He is well known as *Yesu wa Tongareni* which can be translated as Jesus of Tongaren and *Mwalimu* by his followers. Wekesa claims:

I have to accomplish the mission which Jesus of Nazareth did not accomplish (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Members of TNJC agree that *Mwalimu* is the promised messiah in line with Prophet Isaiah's prophecies (Isaiah, 53). To them:

Isaiah's predictions were fully accomplished through Wekesa's early life where he grew up in humble circumstances at Tongaren (Nasike, O.I, 2022, June 9)

There are claims that Wekesa grew from a humble background of small-scale farmers (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). The phrase Jesus of Tongaren was first heard by the public through K24 media station in 2016 after they had gone for an interview at his homestead in Lukhokhwe, Tongaren (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

To the members of TNJC, it is believed that *Yesu wa Tongareni* was with God even during the creation of the world and all that is in it. *Yesu wa Tongareni* is therefore the son of God and he is still one of the three persons who make up one God. This means that Eliud Wekesa claims to be equal to God. Just like the Jews who opposed the works of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. *Yesu wa Tongareni* has undergone various false accusations that have landed him in the local authorities in Trans Nzoia and Bungoma counties (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). He was at some point condemned falsely just like Jesus Christ of Nazareth leading to his imprisonment (Lucia, O.I, 2022, June 9). The following is a picture of *Mwalimu Yesu*.



Plate 1:Portrait of Yesu wa Tongareni

Source: Photo courtesy of Eliud Wekesa

Members of TNJC believe their founder and leader already existed in heaven before descending to this world. It is claimed that he reincarnated and was born through the power of the Holy

Spirit as a human being and renamed Eliud Wekesa. *Yesu wa Tongaren* was born to human parents in Lukhokhwe village in Tongaren, Bungoma County (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). His mission came into actualization at the age of 30 when God called him and stated his intended mission on earth (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Eliud Wekesa is believed to have powers to save the world and the entire human race (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). According to Eliud Wekesa, God first sent him to Nazareth to die in the place of human beings but instead, he was rejected and crucified before completing his mission. After death, he claims to have risen from the grave and ascended to heaven. Further, he believes God sent him again to Tongaren 2000 years later to continue with the mission of saving everyone in the world. Further, he claims that he will continue to exist for the next 77 years. He claims to have the authority to choose people who will go to paradise. He claims that he will choose 160,000 people to go to heaven while 8 billion people will be burnt in hell.

In TNJC, Jesus of Tongaren is believed to be:

The Messiah, the Savior was sent by God to reconcile humanity with God and provide the means for eternal life (Lucia, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Members of TNJC place their faith in *Mwalimu* as their Lord and Savior and believe that through his death and resurrection, they can receive forgiveness of sins and have a restored relationship with God. The teachings and life of *Mwalimu* as recorded in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, form the foundation of TNJC's beliefs and practices. The TNJC emphasizes the importance of following *Yesu wa Tongaren's* teachings, such as love, compassion, forgiveness, and righteousness, as a way of imitating Christ and growing in faith. Worship in TNJC typically involves prayer, singing hymns, reading and studying the Bible, and reflecting on the life and teachings of Jesus. Sermons and teachings focus on understanding and applying the teachings of *Yesu wa Tongaren* in everyday life.

Correspondingly, members of TNJC believe that apart from casting out evil spirits, *Yesu wa Tongaren* has powers to control the weather, heal the sick and provide essential needs for the less unfortunate. During one of the FGDs members claimed that *Yesu wa Tongareni* did the miracle of turning water into tea (Lucia, O.I, 2022, June 9).

1.12 Doctrinal Differences and Unique Teachings

As seen from the previous chapters, the study of NRMs is a complex phenomenon with various characteristics that help distinguish them from other alternative religions. Their beliefs, practices and cultural expressions hence vary greatly from other socio-religious institutions. Here are some of the core beliefs and practices that distinguish the members of TNJC from other NRMs.

1.13 Worship in TNJC

Worship is a term used to describe the act of showing reverence, honour, and devotion to a deity, religious figure, or other object of religious or spiritual significance. Worship can take many forms, including prayer, meditation, singing, offerings, and ritual practices. According to Barasa:

We TNJC members rely on prayers for they consider them to be the source of all of their benefits and achievements, as well as the foundation of their practice and theology (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

An essential component of their worship is prayer. The TJNC offers a variety of prayers, including private prayers, communal prayers, and songs. The way that TNJC communicated with their God was through prayer. According to Wekesa, O.I. (2022, June 9), TNJC demanded that prayer be the only method of receiving divine revelation.

During the fieldwork, informants confirmed that the Tongaren TNJC prays in a manner distinct from other Christian denominations. Everyone is expected to rest on Sunday because it is their day of worship. On days of worship, nobody is supposed to work or even go to the store to buy food.

We practice piety, which is why we dress in garments revealed by the Holy Spirit since God is holy (Muloli, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The believers also hold that it is improper to wear shoes or bring money into a place of worship. Additionally, there was no distinction between how men and women conducted themselves during prayer since both of them raised their hands in prayer in a position of receiving God's blessings (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). During worship services, Wekesa is attended to and protected by human angels, in addition to the disciples who surround him. Following is a picture taken during one of the TNJC's worship services:



Plate 2: Portrait of Yesu wa Tongareni

Source: Nation Media Group (2023), www.nation.africa.com

As was the case everywhere, the TNJC in Tongaren boosted their prayers in 2022 because they felt obligated to do so for the nation, which was enslaved by the election season at the time

(Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). So, to focus on their prayers, they would make pilgrimages to their church. As pilgrimages to their church became a typical occurrence for TNJC in Tongaren, they grew to be regarded as extraordinary because they would carry special revelation. Throughout this time of prayer, they would receive several revelations and directives that would later become the cornerstone of TNJC beliefs and practices (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The Tongaren TNJC pray with their eyes closed, as is customary in many Christian churches. It is stated that Eliud Wekesa, the founder and leader of TNJC, received the instructions on how to pray. The approach was to hold the notion that God's home was a holy place. Additionally, the issue of money might make the holy place impure because, according to the Bible, the location where God dwells should only be used for worship and not for commerce (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9) praying with the hands raised in the air and the eyes closed. According to Kataka, they pray with their eyes closed to:

Avoid getting sidetracked by our surroundings and put ourselves in a better position to receive visions (Kataka, O. I, 2022, June 9).

In prayer, exorcism, prophecy, and vision are given particular focus and attention. Divine healing, also referred to as prayer-based physical healing, is an essential component of TNJC faith. In reality, the two most often cited justifications for attending church services are the healing of illness and liberation from oppression. TNJC in Tongaren Sub-County has designated Thursdays and Fridays as days exclusively for healing purposes through divine prayers, it was discovered during the fieldwork (Barasa, O.I 2022, June 9). On these days, medicinal substances like holy water and oil are frequently consecrated. Additionally, it was discovered that some TNJC prophets, angels, and prophetesses asserted to have particular healing abilities through prayer (Barasa, O.I 2022, June 9).

Throughout the study, it was observed that people from all walks of life were going to the houses of their leaders to seek spiritual healing. Those who claimed to have experienced healing and miracles typically gave testimonies of them during the FGDs. Many of the people who were healed had gone through horrifying events like demonic possessions (Topistar, O.I, 2022, June 9). This explains why many who are disgruntled and disillusioned with the mission churches' approach to the problem of evil seek out the spiritual TNJC healers.

According to Sumbai, O.I. (2022, June 9) TNJC worship is characterized by screaming, intense shaking of the body and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Members summon the attention, strength, and activity of God, Jesus of Tongaren, the Holy Spirit, and the heavenly powers against the malevolent evil spirits through effective prayer and complex ritual action (Ibid). Sumbai further notes:

Adoration, confession, intercessions, requests, and gratitude make up the role and structure of prayer (Sumbai, O.I. 2022, June 9).

Psalms and the recital of holy names are used to make petitions (Matumbai, O.I, 2022, June 9). The aggressiveness, ritualism, and fervour of their devotion are key characteristics that were noted throughout the fieldwork. According to Matumbai, the TNJC views prayer as the only route to the paranormal, the key that unlocks the cosmos, the source of miracles, and the road to

enlightenment. Any TNJC member who wants to be called and utilized by God must fulfil this requirement (Matumbai, O.I, 2022, June 9). One important feature of TNJC prayer was that it frequently adopted different shapes on its own, following the Holy Spirit's guidance. It may cause the worshippers to scream, shout, make unusual noises, go into a trance or experience euphoria, and occasionally utter things they cannot understand (Njukhilile, O.I, 2022, June 9). *Others might feel compelled to wrestle, fall to the ground, walk back and forth, gesticulate, and occasionally jump as a result* (Samweli, O.I, 2022, June 9).

In the Tongaren TNJC group, prayers were exceedingly significant and even came before dreams, prophecies, and visions. The act of praying "spiritualizes the individual and absorbs him or her into realms where lust desires and craving of the natural person are completely done away with" (Meyer, 2004). Wherever TNJC members gather for worship, this component of fervent prayer continues to draw large crowds and bystanders who witness spiritual power, salvation, and solutions to socio-religious, cultural, spiritual, and economic challenges.

As earlier mentioned, their normal day of worship is on Sundays. The service usually begins by going through a room the members call 'an ark' that is slightly adjacent to their main church. In this room, one is supposed to enter barefooted, confess their sins then exit outside through another door before entering the main church. Unfortunately, both the researcher and the assistant were not allowed to enter the main church due to several reasons, among them the presence of henna on the hands, having dreadlocks and wearing ear studs. In the case of the research assistant, it was because he had a moustache and jeans trousers. To Mwalimu, this implied that such people were still living for the pleasures of the world, an action that both God the Father and the Holy Spirit were against. However, Wekesa explains that the service involved intense and thorough prayer sessions with the congregants. During the session, the 'angels' and 'prophets' are usually in control of the process with the help of Mwalimu and the Holy Spirit.



Plate 3: Yesu wa Tongaren's angels kneeling before him after a church service

Source: Shiro Mbugua (UGC)

From outside, songs of praises could be heard accompanied by clapping, dancing, ululations and the use of drums. In the congregation, there are usually women who take notes of the events of the day. These women are not allowed to stand up during the entire service. The women, Wekesa recognizes them as his human angels help him to carry out God's intended mission of preaching the gospel.

Following is a picture of *Yesu wa Tongaren* preaching in one of his sermons.

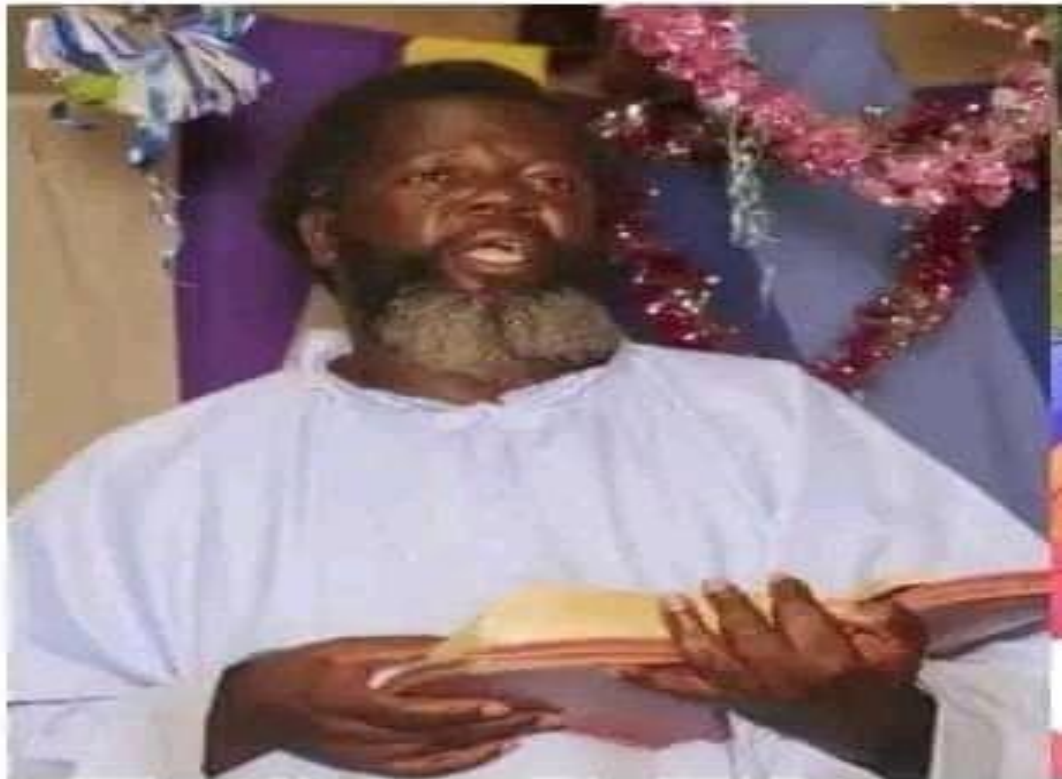


Plate 4: *Yesu wa Tongaren* preaching in one of his sermons.

Source: Afrimax English

After the main sermon, the congregation walks out of the church singing and dancing surrounding the compound seven times. This session is led by the angels and prophets while “Jesus of Tongaren” follows keenly. According to Mwalimu, moving around his compound seven times signifies God's intended mission on earth. Going seven times signifies moving to all nations of the world spreading the gospel and casting out demons.

1.14 Belief in angels in TNJC

Angels are considered to be divine or supernatural beings who act as messengers, guardians, or helpers of humans. They are often depicted as winged humanoid figures, sometimes with other symbolic attributes. According to TNJC, these are both finite and special supernatural beings that are created by God to serve Him and humanity. They act as God's human helpers, human protectors, proclaimers of God's message, dispersers of revelation, guardians, ministering of God's will and executors of the Divine will of God (Nelima, O.I, 2022, June 9).

In line with Luke 20:36, TNJC followers have always referred to angels as God's offspring (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). They are portrayed as God's agents, ambassadors, and messengers who are obedient to Him and of unquestioned integrity (Kataka, O.I, 2022, June 9). As such, "they are helpers and protectors to people in need, as proclaimers of news or mediators of revelations from God, and as guides and guardians" (Lucia, O.I, 2022, June 9). Angels are

regarded in the TNJC as ministering Spirits whose functions could not be limited to specialized categories but were presented in broad and varied auxiliary functions.

Members of the TNJC think that angels exist and carry out functions that are comparable to those of the Holy Spirit. They act as messengers, defenders, and advisers for the followers of God. They are mediators between God and man. Wekesa notices this;

Angels are messengers who protect and guard us and relay reports to God on our behaviour here on earth. Besides protecting us, they offer blessings to us. Even at death, it is your guardian angel who takes your soul to God (Wekesa, O.I 2022, June 9).

Equally significant was the fact that human angels were in TNJC and that their roles did not contradict or diminish the primacy of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, and the Trinity in TNJC's spirituality. Wekesa Confirms that within TNJC there were two types of angels namely regular angels and personal guardian angels. The regular angels act as guardians of people and all things physical. To the members of TNJC, these angels are sent as messengers to humanity. Personal guardian angels on the other hand protect and warn humans, as well as act as warriors on behalf of God (Wekesa, O.I 2022, June 9).

The human angels are given names similar to biblical characters such as Jacob, Leviticus, Daniel, Joseph, John and Joel. Wekesa clarified this claim by saying that:

The task and names of angels are given to certain individuals in the church upon the revelation and guidance of the Holy Spirit. They assist me in carrying out the tasks ahead of me during the day. With them are always a notebook and a pen to note all the experiences that we may encounter. Similarly, specific angels are invoked from time to time perhaps in an attempt to deal with specific issues affecting the church (Wekesa, O.I 2022, June 9).

The TNJC has a fervent belief that angels visit individuals and take on human likenesses. These devotees extend hospitality to outsiders because of this. According to Nanjala Murumwa, a respondent,

God's angels with human likeness unexpectedly visit people of God, and because of this TNJC members show hospitality to strangers (Murumwa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

1.15 Baptism in TJNC

Baptism is a Christian ritual that involves the use of water to symbolize the cleansing of sin and the spiritual rebirth of the believer. Baptism is considered to be an important rite of passage in many Christian denominations and is usually administered by a priest or minister. TNJC borrows from the Biblical examples where in the Old Testament, baptism was done through ritual washing or immersion in water hence cleansing one from evil. They insist on ablution as stated in Exodus 40:31-32 where Moses, Aaron and his sons used to wash their hands and feet whenever they entered the Tent of Meeting or approached the altar, as the Lord commanded

Moses so that he would be clean. In addition, they refer to Leviticus 14:9 where Prophet Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed. In these instances, water immersion signifies repentance and acquiring a new status as a 'new being'. During baptism, it is interpreted that water is used to wash away all the iniquities and cleanse them from sins and transgressions.

The TNJC also use the example in the New Testament where John the Baptist continued the tradition of baptism. They adopt the tradition of Jonah baptizing Israelites from Jerusalem and Judea and the whole region of the Jordan after confessing their sins (Matthew 34-6). Further, they support the ritual of baptism as stated in 1 Peter 3:21, whereby Apostle Peter advises people to turn from their ways to Christ through baptism. To Wekesa baptism is a public declaration and identification by born-again Christians which signifies the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

The members of TNJC acknowledge the importance of baptism as one of the sacred rites. It was observed that they practised Spirit baptism as opposed to water baptism practised in many missionaries-founded churches. According to Wekesa, Baptism is a pre-requisite to other rituals such as circumcision, marriage, and even death. To the members of this congregation, baptism was embraced early enough by their founder Eliud Wekesa who baptized the earliest members of TNJC in the year 2011. After baptism, members are given new baptismal names depending on the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

As noted earlier, baptism among TNJC was initially done by Eliud alone. A person must have attained the rank of senior elder in the church to be eligible to be a baptizer. The TNJC held that an individual should only be baptized once the Holy Spirit had revealed their baptismal name to them (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9) as opposed to other churches which baptized both adults and newborns. In the case of children, a parent or guardian must be included to help as much as possible. Baptism involves a conversation between the Baptizer and the candidate to be baptized.

To allow for the gift of the Holy Spirit to the members, TNJC also practices baptism by complete submersion in water. A new convert's baptism was marked by excitement and jubilation from the congregation that was present. The happiness stems from welcoming home a prodigal child who was once lost but has since been located. This reminds me of the biblical parable of the prodigal son, who after being away for a long time decided to come home one day and was greeted with joy and rejoicing.

One was considered to be a sincere believer after baptism, and those who had converted were granted a new name and new regalia. A faithful soldier's entrance into the army of Christ, which was always at war with the devil, is supposed to be marked by the regalia (Matumbai, O.I, 2022, June 9). Simply put, they respect baptism because it forgives sins, frees one from evil, and provides him with a new identity and start. Adherents of the TNJC also hold that baptism unites one to the broader body of Christ and allows one to join Jesus during the Parousia. They had the belief that their names were entered into the Book of Life following baptism. (Topistar, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Since the TNJC believes in the power of the Holy Spirit, who among other things, as already mentioned, reveals to the candidate their baptismal names through prayer, they do not provide any instruction before baptism, unlike other Churches. If after praying one had still not been given a baptismal name, their leader and other prayer leaders assisted that person in

praying. The candidate and the elders met the day before the scheduled baptism. This early arrival serves the objective of giving the applicants time to purify themselves to please God. Prayers, repentance, and sacrifice-giving are all methods of purification. Additionally, guidelines on how to conduct themselves throughout the ceremony are given to the candidates to ensure that baptism goes off without a hitch. (Sumbai, O, I, 2022, June 9).

Baptism by immersion is followed by baptism of receiving of the Holy Spirit. It is usually conducted on Sundays while being witnessed by the whole congregation. Males and women sit in separate pews during worship, with males on the right and women on the left. At the sanctuary, members received the gift of the Holy Spirit with Mwalimu's assistance after praying to ask for forgiveness. Women angels in the church have more minor functions and are not elevated to the same level as men angels. However, the bulk of those with the gift of prophecy in the TNJC were women; it is believed that women use the gift to make up for their low status in the church (Topistar, O.I, 2022, June 9).

In conclusion, gaining a new name is the most significant aspect of TNJC baptism. As was already mentioned, these names are highly prized since individuals prayed for days or months for the Holy Spirit to reveal them to the applicant. They awaited the dream, vision, or prophecy that would reveal the candidate's baptismal name (Murumwa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Most of these names came from the Old Testament, particularly those that belonged to individuals of great character. Biblical figures including Abraham, Moses, Aaron, Samuel, Elijah, Jeremiah, and Joshua were among them. Contrarily, Deborah, Miriam, Lydia, Dorcas, Rebecca, Rachel, Naomi, and Ruth are the most common female names in the TNJC (Mumbai, O.I, 2022, June 9). These titles represented the new skills that had been bestowed upon one by the Holy Spirit upon baptism. The door to perform any rituals for TNJC new converts was then opened upon baptism.

1.16 The TNJC understanding of Sin

According to Christian beliefs embraced by the TNJC, sin entered the world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Sin is viewed as a universal problem that affects all human beings, leading to a separation from God and a distortion of our true nature. The TNJC teaches that sin is not merely the commission of specific wrongful actions but also includes the condition of the human heart, characterized by self-centeredness, rebellion against God, and a propensity to do what is contrary to His will. Sin refers to an act that is considered to be contrary to the will of God or to go against moral or ethical principles (Zalta *et al* (2002). Sin can take many forms, including acts of commission, such as lying or stealing, as well as acts of omission, such as failing to help someone in need. Sin is often seen as a reflection of a person's internal state and can be accompanied by feelings of guilt or shame.

The consequences of sin, as understood in TNJC, include spiritual separation from God, guilt, brokenness in relationships, and the potential for eternal separation from God. The TNJC emphasizes the need for repentance, which involves acknowledging one's sins, confessing them before God, and seeking His forgiveness and reconciliation (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). The TNJC teaches that forgiveness of sins is made possible through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They believe that through faith in their Jesus of Tongaren, individuals can receive forgiveness, experience spiritual renewal, and be reconciled to God (Lucia, O'I, 2022). To address the issue of sin, the TNJC encourages its members to strive for a

life of righteousness, guided by the teachings of Mwalimu and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. They promote living following God's commandments, practising love, forgiveness, and moral integrity.

To the members of TNJC, sin is seen as an immoral act against God's law and causing harm to others (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Many TNJC members agree with Wekesa's view that sin turns humans away from God and towards themselves and their desires. However, humans can still bring back their relationship with God by way of God rescuing the sinners from their hopeless conditions. Members of this congregation view all sins as equal and serious and that they may bar one from getting baptized unless they confess and get baptized.

1.7 Rites of passage and the Concept of Ritual uncleanness

Rites of passage are ceremonies that mark the transition from one stage to another (Wanyonyi, 2019). These ceremonies are important in any given African community although they vary community from to community. Earlier, it had been noted that the Luhya traditions had a significant influence on the TNJC of Tongaren, as well as other places, in terms of their way of life and worship. As a result, all indigenous Luhya rites of passage were highly revered by members of this faith. The rites of passage among the TNJC began at birth and finished at death. Names, becoming an adult, and marriage were additional rites of passage.

To members of TNJC, as soon as a baby is conceived, their lives begin and it continues until they die. Every single person is made in the image of God. This goes hand in hand with the time of conception too. Therefore, aborting a child for members of TNJC is the same as killing a person made in the image of God:

Life begins at conception. As soon as a baby has been conceived, it becomes a real person that should be given the same rights as a person (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The meaning of life according to TNJC Christians is ultimately found in their founder *Yesu wa Tongareni* (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). In light of this, life for members of this congregation cannot be without meaning unless it revolves around their maker and founder. It is a journey that involves knowing God and trusting Him every moment, especially in the darkest ones.

Giving birth is a widely celebrated event for TNJC since it results in the spread of life. Following the gender of the infant, the woman refrains from attending church for 33 days after giving birth for boys and 66 days for girls (Leviticus 12:4-5) (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Wekesa adds that because the lady is regarded as filthy after this period, she and her child went to the church to participate in the cleansing ceremony. It's significant to note that neither the husband nor the child's father received any prayers or cleanses. It is argued that the male should have prayed for himself, cleaned his clothes, and bathed in water to cleanse himself of the taboo on the day the wife was cleansed.

After birth, the child was given a name. Members of the TNJC rigidly take names for their children from the Bible, particularly names of powerful figures in the Old Testament. According to popular belief, these names bestowed upon their bearers the same energy that decorated these biblical characters (Lucia, O.I, 2022, June 9). The rite of adulthood is the third major initiation rite in TNJC. To the members of TNJC adulthood rites are usually done at the

onset of puberty age (around 12-13 years of age). At this stage, their main focus is to ensure the shaping of productive community-oriented responsible adults. This transition is exceedingly important to members of TNJC since it is during this stage that the initiate is systematically guided and directed in their life cycle. At this stage, when the youth (both boys and girls) of TNJC reach the stipulated age they are expected to transform into adults and they often receive guidance from selected church members or church leaders. Among the teachings that the initiates undergo are the rules and taboos of society, moral instructions and social responsibility (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Marriage is the fourth rite of passage that the TNJC places a great deal of emphasis on since it elevates a person's social and ecclesiastical position (Njukhilile, O.I., 2022, June 9). If a man is not married, he cannot become an elder. It's also crucial to note that the girl was given control over the wedding date because it couldn't fall on a day when she had her period. After all, that rendered her ritually unclean and prevented her from taking part in any ceremonies (Nafula, O.I, 2022, June 9). In addition, since members of this specific congregation regarded Sunday as a significant day for performing their rites and ceremonies, weddings in the TNJC were held on Sunday (Sabbath day), just like any other ceremony (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Death is the ultimate rite of passage. The Africans viewed death as a permanent separation between the deceased and the family's living members. It became evident during our research that TNJC members had numerous rituals and beliefs regarding dying. Attending funerals and burial ceremonies, as well as touching the coffin or the ground while it was being buried, was considered ritually unclean for TNJC members. Barasa observed:

It is a taboo to touch the dead, the coffin and the soil during burial. One is considered unclean after they return from any funeral or burial ceremonies. However, we have some people among us who are selected to do this job (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Additionally, it was decided that if photos were to be taken at a funeral in this church, they were to be removed away from the casket. In contrast, touching or getting close to a coffin is a widespread practice in other Christian groups. As a result, married males are chosen in TNJC to carry out burial rituals. However, these men need to be upstanding citizens and committed churchgoers. These men cannot use the same bathroom or live in the same house as the others after the burial because they are regarded as dirty.

To prevent contaminating the populace, they are not even permitted to shake hands in greeting. After that, they were sequestered for seven days in a room for purification by holy water sprinkles and prayers before reuniting with the other members (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Those who are employed are permitted to come in for work, but they must join the others in seclusion in the evening until they have been cleansed. This custom is thought to have originated in the Bukusu tradition, where the bad energies that might infect the living were viewed as the primary cause of death. Eliud Wekesa once forbade his disciples from going to funerals. Members are forbidden from touching dead bodies and run the risk of being dismissed from the church if they do.

As the church head priest, my role is to ensure that their spirit is well nourished on spiritual matters. My calling is not to bury the dead when my members die (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

1.18 Ecclesiastical attires, days and places of worship

The types of uniforms used by various Church congregations serve as identifiers (Skelton, 2010). In contrast to other Christians, Tongaren Sub County residents who belong to the TNJC dress differently. The way a TNJC member dressed set them apart from those who belonged to other denominations. This aspect of their attire serves as a visible indicator of their unique identity from other religious groups. Pfeiffer noted the following:

The wearing of uniforms or dress contributes to a rich diversity, which helps to determine the identity of each group and psychologically permits an experience of uniqueness, self-esteem, newness and release from daily drudgery (Pfeiffer, 2007).

The TNJC fashion sense has generated a lot of discussion in the community. In the TNJC, the practice of dressing is taken so seriously that each article of clothing must first be prayed for and revealed by the Holy Spirit before being worn (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). He also adds that they do not simply put on any clothes because they are very concerned about spiritual uncleanness, which they believe might be caused by dirty clothes. Members of TNJC sought the Holy Spirit's guidance in everything they accomplished, as was previously mentioned. The TNJC claimed that its style of dressing came from the Holy Spirit and was only revealed after prayer. It is thought that members of this church were only given instructions regarding how to dress and what colour to wear through prayers. Their distinctive clothing colours were a way to distinguish them from other people and their trademark.

The Holy Spirit always directs them to wear a *kanju* (derived from Kiswahili kanzu) while praying. The members of TNJC wear this long robe during prayers and days of worship, according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Lucia, O.I, 2022, June 9). These attires are for all the members of the congregation regardless of their leadership positions, gender and age. The idea of cleanliness required for the selected priests is intended to be reflected upon in the *kanju*. They want to dress simply rather than impressively. The men are required to wear pants, not shorts, underneath the *kanju*. As a result, the ladies are required to wear modest dresses or a pair of skirts over their *kanju*. They shouldn't wear jewellery because it is deemed worldly, whether it be on their wrists, heads, or ears. Members of the TNJC community might wear ties and shoes, and they could wear sandals made from recycled car tyres. This is an expression that signified piety and non-worldliness interests (Wekesa, 2022).

The members receive different revelations on the type and colour to be worn. The founders' outfit was completed with additional items in addition to their clothing. These featured a pole and a cotton sling bag. The Bible, which stands in for the rules and covenants, is in the bag, along with a pen and a notepad where they wrote down their convictions and declarations, which served as a reminder of who they were. He enjoys carrying a stick, which conveys authority (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). On his pilgrimage, he carried staffs and rods as a symbol of his leadership and as weapons to fend off savage beasts, bad spirits, and other

forces.

The holiness of clothing has continued to have an impact on TNJC members' way of life and has given rise to powerful religious symbolism among adherents. The dressing also serves as a marker, establishing a barrier between believers and daily life or the profane world. It should be noted that a strange finding during the fieldwork was that certain TNJC members, aside from the founder and leader, did not always wear their kanjus, only donning them during church services or on Sabbath days. Worship is how TNJC expresses their beliefs and way of life. Generally speaking, Sunday was the day of worship for most Christians, however this varied based on the particular denomination. We determined that Saturdays were the day of worship for the TNJC. Sundays were viewed as a day to commemorate the day that Jesus rose from the dead.

The clergyman who carries the cotton sling bag is occasionally picked by the group's leader, Eliud Wekesa, after being put to the test. The Bible, a notebook, and a pen are required items for this particular leader on Saturdays and other service days chosen during the week, such as Friday. The typical Saturday service, which includes preaching, is not followed on other days of the week instead one-on-one service is provided. During the service, the congregation discussed their concerns with the pastor. It also featured solitary meditation or social gatherings (Njukhilile, O.I, 2022, June 9).

1.19 Belief in Eschatology in TNJC

Eschatology is a branch of theology that deals with the study of the end times, or the final events of human history as described in religious texts and traditions. It explores questions related to death, judgment, heaven, hell, the return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the ultimate fate of the world and its inhabitants (Aderibigbe, 2019). In Christianity, for example, eschatology is centred on the belief of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the events that will occur leading up to his return. This includes the rise of the Antichrist, the Great Tribulation, the Rapture, and the final judgment. Eschatology also involves different interpretations of the events described in religious texts and traditions. For example, there are different views among Christians on the timing of the Second Coming of Christ and the sequence of events leading up to it. These include premillennialism, postmillennialism, and millennialism, among others.

As a result of their belief in the eschatological second coming of Jesus, TNJC members place a strong focus on evangelization. This explains why the Tongaren members marched in procession to their worship spaces to share the good news with others in keeping with Jesus' instructions to preach to all the nations. They emphasized the value of irregular procession to snare sinners in markets and on roads. The Lord had commanded them to take the gospel to every creature, and by doing this, they were able to reach the unreachable sinners (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

According to Wekesa, eschatology is not only grounded on the Biblical Jesus' Resurrection and proclamation of God's Kingdom, but it is also oriented towards Christ's return in glory, towards the coming of "a new heaven and a new earth" that the Risen and Glorious Christ will bring about upon his return to judge the righteous and the sinners, the living and the dead, and to ensure his eternal Reign. This explains Wekesa's mission towards recruiting more converts to TNJC by preaching to them the good news and giving them worldly hope. However,

to Him, hope is not only the objective towards living the final days on earth but also being ready to acknowledge our sins and repent, being obedient toward the teachings of God through portraying Christ-like behaviours and having the assurance of a coming divine intervention that will introduce something new that people have failed and will fail to achieve (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The end time is the day of the Lord as Wekesa describes it: It is the day beyond other days. On this day, there will be roles which will be reversed (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

According to Wekesa, during 'the end times' there will be "the pouring out of God's spirit" to illustrate the coming period of restoration (Joel 2:28) and the coming of a new creation (as referred to Isaiah 65:17-18 and 66:22). To Wekesa, all that the Old Testament predicted will occur in the end and it has begun already. This is justified through events that are happening in the world such as the Russian–Ukraine war (2022), COVID-19 (2019), Social Injustices such as excessive land grabbing, corruption, sexual abuse, gender-based violence, violation of human rights, denial of medical and education services to the poor through public strikes.

Concerning how the world may end, Wekesa confirms that the world will end in 2058 however, he is not sure of a specific day and date but it will surely come. "*Worldwide Liberation from 1981 to 2058*" (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). He says this as a revelation to him from his father God and that is something that all Christians should wait to testify as it comes into fulfillment.

During this period of Worldwide Liberation, Wekesa, O.I (2022, June 9) confirms that there will be wars and famines and diseases, epidemics, water will turn into blood, and heavenly signs that will alert Christians of the end of the world. These disasters will signify God pouring out his wrath against sin, evil and wickedness. Then will come to an antichrist in the form of a political ruler who will establish control over the whole earth. He will be backed up by a false religious ruler with whom they will dominate the world. Consequently, the only things that will save human beings from this antichrist are the people of God.

1.20 Visions, dreams, prophecies and revelations in TNJC

The TNJC's theological practices were centred on visions, dreams, prophecies, and revelations. Visions are experiences in which a person sees or perceives something that is not physically present, usually in a supernatural or mystical context. Visions can be experienced in a variety of ways, such as in dreams, through meditation, or as a result of religious or spiritual practices. Dreams are experiences that occur during sleep in which the dreamer perceives images, sounds, thoughts, and feelings that may or may not be based on reality. Prophecies are predictions or revelations of future events, usually based on divine inspiration or supernatural communication while revelations are insights or knowledge that are believed to be revealed through divine or supernatural means.

Visions, prophesies, revelations and dreams are seen as a major way through which God communicated his will with the TNJC people. Although the Bukusu people could attempt to discern the will of God through methods of divination, such as reading their dreams, this procedure was involved as it entailed a sacrificed animal. To Wekesa, O.I (2022, June 9) dreams and visions were a type of "Gods inspired divination." This means that they were a type of divination that was initiated by God Himself. Even so, some members of TNJC sought to

experience a revelation or dream by sleeping in the church. If successful, God would appear to the person in a dream. This is called an incubation dream (Horton, 2010), and is sometimes associated with the Old Testament instances with the experiences of Samuel (I Sam 3) and Jacob (Gen 28). Their songs reflect the doctrine of their church. Songs were an integral part of their lives and were utilized to convey significant messages. The songs' lyrics include confessions and adorations, with refrains of "Amina," "Halleluya," and "Praise God." One of the key components of TNJC music is the drum. The more they pounded the drum, the farther they were said to have held the demon at bay (Ibid). The TNJC offered a celebratory religion marked by vigorous dance and singing accompanied by strong drumming. The church's founder, prophets, and some specific members get a revelation of spiritual hymns and melodies from a supernatural source.

1.21 Conclusion

This article was set to investigate the religious beliefs and practices of TNJC of Tongaren. Amongst them, were their way of baptism, their beliefs in different worldviews, their way of dressing, their way of worship, and their views on the scriptures and rites of passage. From the findings, it became apparent that TNJC members communicated their beliefs and practices through worship. Although Sunday is generally the day of worship for Christians, there are variations based on the practising denomination. The TNJC's theological practices were centred on visions, dreams, prophecies, and revelations. It was also revealed that Tongaren TNJC members dressed differently from other Christians. The way they dressed set their adherents apart from those of other denominations.

The study established that all activities carried out by TNJC members were subject to predetermined guidelines involving the appearance of the Holy Spirit. As time went on, it emerged that some of the regulations that the TNJC members had adhered to religiously, as discussed in the fifth chapter, had been altered and softened.

1.22 Recommendations

The study noted that the members of TNJC inclusive of their founder are treated with malicious intent and with suspicion by the government. This might be due to their extreme activities and their beliefs, practices, and teachings. Society should be aided in understanding other religions and their practices and belief systems because they inform their identity and give them a sense of belonging and history and hence help to prevent religious intolerance.

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