

**Contemporary Socio-Religious Transformations: A Case of the New Jerusalem Church,  
Tongaren Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya**

By

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this article was to analyze the transformations of the New Jerusalem Church from 2011-2023. It was rooted in the Social Movement Theory coined by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2004) to analyze the group's emergence and socio-transformation in the said period. 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 by Eliud Wekesa who is identified by his followers as 'Jesus' of Tongaren. It was a qualitative study that adopted the exploratory cross-sectional research design. This study employed the constructivist philosophical paradigm that maintains the fact that what is socially constructed as reality is a result of the human mind from his daily experiences. 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 identified purposefully while secondary data was gathered from secondary sources found in libraries. Data was analyzed through content and thematic analysis. The study found that the emergence of the TNJC movement was a result of the call of the founder, and religious and cultural factors. The study established that this movement had undertaken Socio-religious transformations over time in terms of dressing, marriage and family life, education, health, dietary prescriptions, economically and politically. These transformations have informed the TNJC's way of life and the extended society. The article concludes that, other than having a deep history, and a variety of religious beliefs and practices, it has transformed its members' way of life. The article recommends that NRMs among them TJNC should be allowed to promote socio-religious transformations. The findings will benefit society by providing an impetus for people to understand NRMs and shed light on the TNJC's founder, practices, beliefs, and socio-religious transformation process.

**Keywords:** Kenya, Transformations, The New Jerusalem Church, Tongaren, Society, Education, Dressing, Employment, Kenya

## **Contemporary Socio-Religious Transformations: A Case of the New Jerusalem Church, Tongaren Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya**

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### **1.0 Introduction**

This article seeks to analyze the transformations of the New Jerusalem Church from 2011-2023. 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. Notably, these new movements were formed to offer responses to the historically unprecedented levels of change in every aspect of their lives. Such areas of life included cultural, economic, social, political, and religious that followed the imposition of colonial rule that began in the second half of the 19th century. These movements are highly pluralistic and syncretic since they freely combine some doctrines and practices from diverse sources within their belief systems. Some are usually founded by highly charismatic and authoritarian leaders believed to wield extraordinary powers or insights (Adedibu, 2022). There are several explanations regarding TNJC, especially on its history the personality of the founder, its doctrines, observances, and practices. This study employed the constructivist research philosophy that maintains the fact that what is socially constructed as reality is a result of the human mind from his daily experiences. It was discovered that while TNJC kept some of its procedures, there had also been significant alterations since it first surfaced. This article discusses changes that have been noticed in TNJC in Tongaren, including those that have affected politics, education, dressing, health, employment, and diet. How has TNJC of Tongaren affected Kenyan society is another subject that the article addressed. The effects of TNJC on society were examined through the Social Movement Theory. The social, political, and economic facets of TNJC members were analyzed.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Kenya as a country has mainstream churches and many NRMs. Some of these NRMs were founded to oppose colonization and to challenge some doctrines introduced by the early missionaries. However, after the end of the era of colonization, more new religious movements have kept springing up with unclear motives. There is limited information on the pull or push factors for the emergence of these NRMs and the socio-religious transformation of the New Jerusalem Church of Tongaren and the role they have played in promoting the socio-religious transformations of their members. There is a need to answer the question; this study sought to fill gaps of knowledge on the socio-religious transformation of TNJC between 2011 and 2023.

## **1.2. Research Objectives**

The objective of the study was to examine the Socio-Religious Transformations of the New Jerusalem Church, Tongaren Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya.

## **1.3 Socio-Religious Transformations within the New Jerusalem Church**

Socio-religious transformations within TNJC refer to the social and religious changes or shifts that have occurred since the inception of TNJC up to date within the TNJC community. The TNJC, led by its founder and leader Eliud Wekesa, also known as "Yesu wa Tongaren" in Tongaren, has undergone substantial change over time, changing its perspective on the world. They believed that their existence was temporary and that there was no need to involve themselves in a world that was rapidly coming to an end (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). However, they heeded the Bible's teachings that "we should enjoy the days of heaven on earth...the righteous shall eat the good of the land" (Matthew 6:33; Deuteronomy 11:21), which prevented TNJC members from completely renouncing the realities of life. This insight made it clear that TNJC members had a right to enjoy and engage in activities that contributed to their material well-being in the place that the Lord had given them.

The TNJC live a life of extreme simplicity while they wait to enter paradise by participating in earthly pursuits. In this church, good deeds like preaching, Bible study, emancipating people from worldly pleasures, and most significantly, care for the wellbeing of others, were encouraged. According to Wekesa, O.I. (2022, June 9) if one achieved this equilibrium, "he/she would have unbound happiness in the new world as well." This was motivated by the communalist idea that "I am because we are and because we are therefore, I am" that permeates African thought (Mbiti, 2003). Traditional Africans and TNJCs only differed in that, unlike the former, who were unified by their shared ethnicity, "the latter were united by the virtue of belonging to one faith" (Park, 2010). As a result, TNJC found it difficult to balance their spirituality with what they referred to as secular difficulties in this world. However, given the realities of the modern world and the effects of globalization, change was unavoidable. The movement has changed over time, even though some TNJC members still adhere to some of the organization's earlier fundamental values and principles.

After its official documentation by the Registrar of Societies as an NRM in 2011, the administration stopped harassing them, and TNJC continued to evangelize more individuals (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). When the TNJC faced various religious forms in independent Kenya, it underwent evident social-religious transformations in the rapidly changing Kenyan culture (WBBC Magazine, 2019). They were forced to adapt to societal changes, which in certain cases resulted in synthesis, reinvention, and change as well as the revival of the formerly indigenous religion (Odipo, 2019).

Some traditional TNJC activities and ways of thinking had declined as a result of modernization and socio-religious changes in Kenyan society, while others had been revived and modernized (Ibid). The once-rich and dynamic culture of TNJC, like that of other religions, became diluted as a result of globalization, advanced and increased interaction among people, facilitated by progressive technological changes in communication, knowledge, and skills, as well as the blending of cultural practices, systems, and values.

#### 1.4 Transformation in Attires

The importance of clothing in establishing a people's identity and culture as well as a person's personality cannot be overstated. How one dress defines TNJC. Africans lost their cultural practice of wearing traditional hides and skins as a result of the arrival of Western fashion (Mwangi, 2016). Mwangi adds that some Africans did, however, at first reject the new fashion trend, with TNJC serving as an example. We observed that TNJC participants continued to wear Kanzus as their ceremonial attire (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). The Holy Spirit guided the TNJC dress code through petitions, instructing them to wear clothing without any specific colours. The TNJC members detested European clothing. Men were not permitted to have various hairstyles, while women were forbidden from donning jewellery because they deemed it to be too "worldly" (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Tongaren TNJC's perspective on clothing style gradually changed. They have a kanju leader and founder, as was already noted. However, through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, they were given new instructions on wearing the kanju dress (*Ibid*). With modernity, TNJC stopped criticizing Western attire, and many people now choose to wear long pants and the Kanzus instead of shorts (Nanjala, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Up until 2023, this style of attire was still in use. It has remained unchanged despite the rise of the elite, educated, committed class at TNJC (Lucia, O.I., 2022, June 9). However, TNJC ladies are now clothing in a new way, according to fashion. They began donning colourful clothing created in Europe. The clothing is worn everywhere except on worship days and during private services. Respondent Nanjala noted the following:

In Tongaren, the women of TNJC have completely changed their way of dressing. They wear expensive but simple clothes. Many prefer bright colours like white, green and purple. There is a unique fashion that they prefer however in which the clothes are tailored to be long (Nanjala, O.I, 2022, June 9).

In the focus group discussion, every man concurred that the robes and Kanzus they wore represented purity. They continued to dress in the original antagonistic manner. Makona remarked:

The majority have changed and accepted the European sense of fashion that they initially rejected especially the women. However, some still insist on the Kanza especially when going to the sanctuary. These are mostly the leaders of service, prayer leaders and prophets. The Kanza is thus an instruction of the Holy Spirit and those that are instructed to wear it must do so to escape punishment because of disobedience. Kanza signifies the angel of peace' (Makona, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The TNJC of Tongaren, believe that their clothing contains religious meaning, has power over evil spirits, and serves as a distinction between believers and nonbelievers (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). As was already said, the *kanju* acted as TNJC's "trademark" to set them apart from the general populace. It is asserted that the Holy Spirit revealed the hue of the kanju to be worn through prayer.

Members of the TNJC hold the belief that angels appointed by God to protect them are in charge of them. Depending on the amount of spirituality, position, and role-playing in the church, the angel may alter. It is significant to note that, despite the Tongaren TNJC's

evolution and acceptance of various clothing choices, like as the wearing of shorts, closed-toed shoes were not permitted inside the sanctuary. The reason for this is that the sanctuary was sacred and hence couldn't be dirty.

The habit of wearing clothing in colours other than white was started by their leader Eliud Wekesa, according to this study's anonymous key respondents (Key Informant 21, O.I 2023, January, 2). Because the Holy Spirit talked to every TNJC member, we concluded that the movement's fashion would continue to change because there was no longer a single organization that set standards for and directed how people dressed.

By 2009, many movement members had liberalized, as seen by the current generation of TNJC adolescents whose fashion sense the early members would have described as "worldly." Based on observation, the headgear was the sole thing separating the TNJC kids from the rest (WBBC Magazine, 2022). However, it was noted that even TNJC women in Tongaren had been impacted by shifting fashions and ways of life as a result of the quickening globalization process. An elder who served as a crucial informant said the following:

TNJC founder in Tongaren did not allow women to choose to wear a wedding ring. Women also were not allowed to visit hair salons. They were also not allowed to use other kinds of ornaments like earrings and hair bands. Yesu condemned them as worldly pleasures' (Key informant 22, O.I 2023, January, 2).

This remark stood out among the ladies because the majority of TNJC women continued to wear long, pleated skirts and dresses. They are unable to wear pants and move freely while doing this movement. Any society member who is seen wearing pants shall be wrapped in a wrapper. The founder claims that wearing such garments renders one bare.

The majority of women within this movement have affirmed that before they turned to this sort of dressing, they had been wearing trousers and miniskirts. However, they changed due to *Yesu wa Tongareni's* teachings based on Deuteronomy 22:5 (A lady should not wear men's clothing, and a man should not wear ladies' attire. Any individual who does this is abominable in seeing the LORD your God), they choose to leave what they were putting on and picked this obsolete transformation. In addition, Jesus of Tongaren alleges that people who have braided hair (rasta) won't enter Heaven (Nelima, O.I, 2022, June 9). To him, these people are still living for the earthly pleasures.

### **1.5 Marriage and Family Life**

The marriage institution is held in the highest regard by TNJC in Tongaren, who see it as a priceless gift from God. With its unrivalled effect in preserving the value of fundamental social moral fabrics like the sanctity of marriage and family life, this church has continued to improve the social life in the greater community (Ibid). TNJC strongly opposes polygamy, in keeping with Abaluhya cultural customs.

TNJC members were seen to have altered and condemned polygamy while upholding monogamy alone as the norm during the fieldwork. According to them, the bible specifically stipulates that a man should only have one wife. Wekesa observes:

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For it is written Mathew 19:3-9, Genesis 2:24 that 'Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said for this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?' (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9)

He informs that to avoid polygamous marriages, every man should marry his wife and every woman to have her husband marry so that they can confine themselves rendering their conjugal duties effective.

Nanjala Murumwa a member of TNJC, who is against polygamy, responded by asserting that:

A man does not primarily marry for sex, but to have a family, share happiness, labour and wealth with his children. This does not necessarily have to be through marrying many wives. One can just get them all through marrying one wife (Nanjala, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The monogamous lifestyle was adopted by TNJC members from the Old Testament when patriarchs like Moses and Zachariah were lauded for their monogamous lifestyles. Members of the TNJC think that God approved of the behaviour as a result. Saints from the New Testament like Paul warned against immorality and adultery. According to them, polygamy is a sin and is not permitted in Christianity (Mwangi, 2016).

During the fieldwork, it was noted that polygamy was becoming less common among the Tongaren community that the TNJC served. External causes, such as financial restrictions brought on by the rising cost of living, rather than church policies, were the basis for this (Makona, O.I, 2022, June 9). To discourage divorce, members who were already polygamous when they joined the churches were urged to remain together.

Divorce cases among TNJC in Tongaren were typically noted to be uncommon and discouraged. As they are regarded and recognized as a show of piety, righteousness, dedication, and continuity of family values, church marriages are preferred over traditional forms. The TNJC community accepted and acknowledged African customary marriage as a sacred rite of passage that was typically performed with appropriate Christian forms of singing, dancing, and celebration. The priority ascribed to childbearing, which is seen as marriage's primary goal, goes hand in hand with the value of marriage among TNJC. For this reason, childlessness is deeply regrettable since it endangers human life and undermines social order. Due to financial restrictions and the risk of catching HIV/AIDS, many NJC members had changed and rejected polygamy by 2011.

TNJC teaches that sexual relationships are intended to be within the bounds of marriage between a man and a woman. They interpret biblical passages, such as those found in the Old Testament (e.g., Leviticus 18:22) and the New Testament (e.g., Romans 1:26- 27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10), as prohibiting homosexual behaviour. Therefore, within the TNJC same-sex sexual relationships are considered contrary to God's intended design for human sexuality. Consequently, individuals within these denominations are encouraged to abstain from homosexual acts and to seek celibacy or pursue heterosexual relationships within the bounds of marriage.

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Since the organization's founding in 2011, members of the TNJC in Tongaren have been actively involved in socio-political and economic enterprises in the area's several urban centres, including Kamukuywa Market, Kiminini, Tongaren, and other locations. Many members were forced to relocate to different towns in search of a better metropolitan lifestyle. They were soon confronted with problems including homelessness, unemployment, drunkenness, prostitution, and drug misuse. These eventually led to significant moral slackness and new societal standards. The followers of TNJC were not exempt from changes in lifestyle, ethical issues, or moral dilemmas. A new challenge has entered Africa, pushing a wedge between religious and secular life, which was unheard of in traditional living (Mbiti, 2015). Because of this, Tongaren as a whole developed the impression that "some of TNJC members had become loose morally, that some drunk alcohol and moved around as non-Christians which was unheard of before" (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Due to the structural shift in the global economy in 2011, members of the TNJC community in Tongaren transformed and began acquiring materialistic, individualistic behaviours and ideals that were traditionally linked with Western culture. Some TNJC members continued to live a modest, godly, and unworldly lifestyle in Tongaren following their founder Eliud Wekesa's teachings. The movement has thus demonstrated both continuity and change over time. A manifestation of "Christianity consistent with their own unique historical experience, rooted self-consciously in their unique cultures", as was previously noted (Mwangi, 2016) is what the TNJC stands for.

Since its founding, the TNJC, led by Eliud Wekesa, has heavily imitated and borrowed from other protestant faiths, which has caused their culture to be lost or diluted and propagated harmful values across the organization. The foundation upon which the TNJC community was formed was the target of this development's conceptual and methodical rage. The community has been impacted by modern Christians' moral deterioration. The spiritual scale has gone downward through time. The neighbourhood began displaying signs of the "de-culturizing" impact of Western Christianity, which forced the group to ruthlessly cut off its roots and lose its authenticity. It is succumbing to the cultural influence of Western churches (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

In today's changing world, when the younger generations are questioning the authority of their parents, it is particularly difficult for the TNJC youth to remain true to God's word (Mbiti, 2015). In a society that is changing quickly, TNJC youth have a responsibility to maintain their moral, ceremonial, and spiritual purity. Many TNJC kids have lost their good Christian character and morals, leading them to rebel against God's word and find themselves immersed in the pursuit of wealth and worldly pleasures. One young participant from the TNJC noticed that: Today, we adapt to the changing world in our pursuit of wealth (Mukire, O.I, 2022, June 9).

TNJC had major obligation in Tongaren to teach spiritual principles to young people before and after they reached adulthood. This had been seen at numerous youth gatherings, seminars, and workshops held throughout Tongaren. It is important to note right away that our fieldwork revealed a significant upward trend in the number of young people joining TNJC.

Members of TNJC are also encouraged to marry amongst themselves. Choosing a marriage partner based on religion or denomination is not right but in the case of this movement, seeds planted in a person by their church times cannot be ignored. One needs to

exercise maximum wisdom and at times seek intervention of the Holy Spirit and *Mwalimu* because marriage is a critical thing in life. Having seen members of TNJC doing most of the things, especially in marriage in a unique way following biblical track (respondent 22, O.I 2023, January,2) was tempted to reveal that however, it is very significant if one gets to marry someone from within this movement. He noted that:

Members of TNJC can escape infidelity. Immorality is the sin that is mostly rebuked day and night. Having women in this ministry dress modestly, there are low chances of cheating in marriage. This is because they won't make other men lust at them. For those reasons, there is a very low chance for you to experience some kind of cheating in your marriage. Another reason is that children are promised a better future. This is because of the many restrictions from the movement where children are likely to adopt moral values. Think about a child growing up and knowing how to dress well. You will hardly find them causing troubles in discos, bars or doing other filthy things (Key respondent 22, O.I 2023, January, 2).

This church plays a very significant role as far as morals are concerned within this community. What it feeds its people is what is reflected in this society.

Despite the degeneration of African culture and morals in the face of globalization, TNJC has persisted in drawing a sizable number of young people from all educational backgrounds. According to this study, the church has a young membership from a variety of social and economic backgrounds between 2011 and 2018 (Nasike, O.I, 2022, June 9). The church has a promising future since it can still attract young people as members. The converts are a result of moving in quest of truth and marriage relationships with families and experiencing spiritual conviction. In response to a question regarding the church's chances for the future, Nasike said:

This church has a bright future, you know we attract quite several people especially the youth, into TNJC and you know our beliefs are not as before when people would run from this church because members did not go to school (Nasike, O.I, 2022, June 9<sup>th</sup>).

The Roman Catholic Church, Friends Churches, and African Independent Pentecost church (AIPC), among others, are just a few of the various denominations from which TNJC has continued to attract adherents.

## **1.6 Education**

The introduction of Western education by the white man, whom the Bukusu saw as the adversary of God's people, prevented the TNJC members in Tongaren from embracing it at first. As a result, TNJC opposed everything that was 'Western' in nature other than the Bible (Makona, O.I, 2022, June 9). Furthermore, TNJC members disregarded education because they saw it as being of this world and instead focused on the heavenly kingdom. Thirdly, TNJC members kept to themselves and were unable to openly associate with other students at schools (Ibid).



A Tongaren elder affirmed that for a long time, the bulk of TNJC members had not placed high importance on education:

TNJC members wanted to preserve their customs and traditions as Africans and were afraid if their children went to school, they would be alienated by others. They could also copy their style like wearing foreign clothes (Key respondent 21, O.I 2023, January, 2).

The first generation of TNJC of Tongaren was negatively impacted by their initial exclusion from both the missionary and African-led Independent Schools, which made it difficult for them for a very long period to even record their history (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). The modernizing age, however, has caused TNJC members to shift their perspective on education. Indeed, one of the most remarkable changes in the history of the TNJC movement is believed to have been the speed at which TNJC members have embraced education (Key Informant 22, O.I 2023, January, 2). By 2011, the majority of TNJC members had enrolled their kids in elementary school, with the majority choosing not to move on to the following grade.

The interest of TNJC members in formal education is said to have occurred after Eliud Wekesa, their leader in Tongaren encouraged his followers to embrace the practice for their independence. Wekesa's children are students at various institutions of higher learning in Kenya. His son is a student at Kiambu College pursuing a diploma certificate while his daughter Nabii Enoka is pursuing a Diploma in Social Work and Community Development at Kisiwa Technical Institute based in Kabuchai Constituency, Bungoma County. Currently, Tongaren MP. Dr. Chikati is sponsoring her education (Namachanja, 2023).

Before this, TNJC was concerned that their kids would be forced to go to school on Sabbath days. They firmly believed that an NJC youngster would benefit more from skipping school than from skipping Sabbath worship (Kataka, O.I, 2022, June 9). Wekesa was able to persuade many of his followers of the value of education since he had gotten a basic education up to the seventh grade in a mission school before becoming a Christian. He informed parents that TNJC school-aged children would be permitted to leave class early to attend Sabbath service (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

A change in their attitudes toward formal education was confirmed in the 2010s by the high rates of school attendance among TNJC youngsters in particular (Ibid). When questioned about whether going to school went against TNJC values, Mukire said:

Going to school was forbidden by the old people before, but we have greatly changed since then, in fact, it is our parents who encourage us to learn the university and for me, I want to be a medical doctor (Mukire, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Additionally, every respondent who was contacted for the survey said that education was important and that TNJC students should pursue higher education, including enrollment in colleges (Ibid). This offered a voice for change in opposition to the rigid, restrictive views that forbade education. Mukire added the following:

TNJC children should go up to the university just like other children because if they fail to do so, they will not be able to acquire lucrative jobs that everyone is running for. They will also be left behind in terms of development and you know, today everyone is looking forward to development (Mukire, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Although the expansion of educated TNJC members was rather slow at first, it picked up speed in 2011 "with the emergence of the first crop of the educated, focused, and committed TNJC elite class" (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). By the year 2018, there were several TNJC students from Tongaren pursuing basic and higher education in educational institutions, which they considered essential to the growth of the community (Ibid). Many TNJC members joined a variety of social and economic roles, including work, business, and trade, as a result of their enthusiasm to further their education. There has been a surge in the number of Tongaren TNJC students studying different degrees in colleges starting in the 2020s, including education, law, medicine, media, and management, to name just a few.

The New Jerusalem Church Student Fellowship (TNJCSF), which is being organized by a group of TNJC students from several higher institutions in Kenya, aims to:

Stop the widespread brain drain of TNJC students, especially those in secondary schools, colleges, and universities (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

This change was required to stop the TNJC students' rising dropout rate, which was noted to be higher than among students in other denominations. It was noted during the fieldwork that a sizable proportion of TNJC youngsters, particularly young males, abandoned their kanjus, especially after completing secondary education (Nasike, O.I, 2022, June 9). Even for individuals who went on to enrol at universities, the practice was reported to be widespread. The results showed that this practice was a result of modernization's effects, which led to juvenile rebellion and challenges to parental authority. TNJC member Zachariah Mukire, a Form 4 graduate about to enrol in college, provided the following explanation as to why this is the case:

Parents force most of us to continue adorning the kanju while in school. Immediately one is of age and can, make independent decisions then the kanju can be discarded (Mukire, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The New Jerusalem Church Students Fellowship (TNJCSF), in addition to organizing Keshas, which involved gathering at odd hours to sing, dance, and pray together, visiting their mother church in Tongaren, and organizing weekend challenges, will represent the interests of TNJC students in tertiary educational institutions. This advancement will steadily move TNJC up socioeconomic participation ladders within the nation (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Due to their dedication to education, TNJC in Tongaren no longer segregated them and instead sent their kids to school so they might receive an education. The adult education programs were utilized by TNJC as well (Barasa, O.I., 2022, June 9), maybe to give people who had previously been unable to attend school the opportunity to do so now. John Barasa remarked that:

My parents did not send him to school even though he had always been eager to learn (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Knowing the value of education, Barasa joined an adult education program that taught basic literacy and English in addition to sending his children to school (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

This is not to indicate that TNJC members did not face difficulties while pursuing their degrees, though. They first experienced discrimination, as was the case with the school that required short skirts as a uniform. Members of the TNJC feel excluded in these situations because they do not wear short dresses. These schools kept preventing the girls from wearing their long dresses, displaying blatant discrimination against them. An anonymous contributor expressed regret that several schools in Nairobi County required girls to wear short dresses, which was against the TNJC faith. She discovered:

Even if the schools would treat our girls especially and allow them to wear long skirts, we are always worried because our girls would be influenced by the others and at that age the adolescent peer pressure will suffice (Nanyama, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Nevertheless, TNJC's passion for knowledge seemed irresistible despite the obstacles, especially in the world that is changing so quickly right now. With members actively promoting abilities in important spheres including theology, media, intellectualism, and science in society, TNJC grew dynamic.

### **1.7 Health**

Over time, the perspective of TNJC in Tongaren regarding health has shown both consistency and change. Members of the TNJC were adamantly opposed to the adoption of Western medicine at the height of their organization. They were so firmly committed to the group's ideology that they would rather perish than receive prompt medical attention. According to their leader and founder Eliud Wekesa, it was a religious obligation not to seek medical care (Makona, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The TNJC also disapproved of early medical treatments since they trusted in faith healing, which meant that when someone was ill, a religious leader would offer prayers for their recovery. Faith healing has been performed by TNJC churches since their founding (Makona, O.I, 2022, June 9). Here, people with health-related issues such as respiratory illness, mobility problems, bone diseases, and cancer would gather together in hopes of getting healed. They prayed together in faith believing that with the intervention of God those who have faith get healed of their illnesses. They considered this form of healing as divine / miracle healing. It involves the removal of any existing physical illnesses or discomforts through the use of divine intervention (Castillo, 2021).

It was not until 2011, after the local government intervention that some members agreed to seek medical attention (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Later, some TNJC members began seeking healthcare just like the rest of the population. Mikaili made a note of:

I seek medical services when am sick because even the doctors use the knowledge that is given by God. We believe that the doctors treat and God heals. God said that we are His co-creators and hence we should continue with his creation (Mikaili, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Many TNJC have progressively grown accustomed to using hospital drugs to treat people's health issues. Today, medical services can diagnose and treat many previously unexplainable illnesses. Many problems that were formerly attributed by TNJC to the mysterious realm might be easily explained by scientific understanding.

While we make these findings, it's crucial to keep in mind that some TNJC members in Tongaren have stayed conservative and have continued to practice the outdated form of faith healing. This is due to their conviction that only God has the power to heal and that using any other healing technique would contaminate the body, the Holy Spirit's temple. During the fieldwork, it was discovered that three out of the fifteen TNJC members still adhere to faith healing and are unable to see a doctor or receive medical care.

### **1.8 Dietary prescriptions**

Members of this faith have been extremely concerned about adhering to the dietary regulations outlined in the Laws of Moses since the beginning of the TNJC movement in 2011 (Makona, O.I, 2022, June 9). Anything that had come into contact with blood was off-limits to them. The TNJC was initially restricted to eating only the meat they had themselves slaughtered. A certain TNJC member was given the task of killing inside and outside the church so that the others could purchase. Typically, Friday was designated as the day of the slaughter (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The TNJC was quite strict about its food requirements (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Any food cooked in regular fat was inedible to them. They scrupulously avoided eating pork because they believed the animal to be impure following Deuteronomy 14 (Ibid). They only used milk cream and fat from the animals they killed. They consequently thought that animal fat was pure and free of impurities that could pollute the body. Tobacco, alcohol, cigarettes, and other intoxicating substances were outright prohibited for its members (Lucia, O.I., 2022, June 9). Additionally, because they were believed to have come into touch with blood, they avoided eating the internal parts of the murdered animals, including the heart, liver, lungs, kidneys, and pancreas (Ibid). Following this movement required strict adherence to the dietary restrictions, proscriptions, and ablution requirements outlined in the book of Leviticus. Due to their inability to eat in public or at social gatherings, TNJC became social outcasts. In our fieldwork, we found that the non-NJC members isolated the TNJC due to their selective feeding behaviours. Lucia noted that:

In the Bukusu culture, eating is a social practice and we share a lot. However, if one cannot eat your food, you also cannot eat it. We believe such kind of a person is a witch (Lucia, O.I, 2022, June 9).

After 2011, a significant portion of TNJC in Tongaren underwent a transition, started eating food prepared with regular cooking oil, and even began bringing meals to social occasions. Pigs,

rabbits, ducks, and many kinds of fish are among the animals that are prohibited from consumption. However, food restrictions loosened significantly by 2022, when TNJC elites started to emerge. It was noted during the fieldwork that they interacted with a variety of people in hotels and consumed meals of various varieties, independent of the type of cooking oil employed (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

### **1.9 Political Transformations in TNJC**

Many young people swore to enter the country's various academic and professional areas after the TNJC-educated elites began to emerge. Individual TNJC members in Tongaren have recently started to show interest in politics. The appointment of a TNJC member from Lukhokwe to the position of MCA in 2022 serves as a prime example. Unfortunately, Elvis Sitati won it during the initial phases of nomination (Njukhilile, O.I, 2022, June 9). However, very few Tongaren TNJC members have managed to advance politically by being appointed to the government by the year 2022 (Odipo, 2019).

It should be emphasized that some TNJC members in Tongaren continued to believe they were heavenly citizens and avoided political activity ever since it was formed. They engaged in religious prejudice, which caused many people to stay politically marginalized. They also discouraged its members from taking part in civic duties like voting or running for office. Murumwa is one of few TNJC members who has never participated in politics or encouraged voting. She, on the other hand, remained silent about it, and before the neighbours discovered out, he used to attribute his inability to vote to have misplaced his ID card. Murumwa observed:

As neighbours, we could sometimes want to accompany each other to vote. Every time they could call me, all I could say was that my Identity Card was lost. After all, they knew how essential an identity card was for voting. So, I could not vote without it (Murumwa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

People's perception of TNJC, which they viewed with scorn, mistrust, and suspicion, was influenced by this behaviour. The goal of religion in politics is undermined by such bigotry because "a higher civic involvement enables religion to contribute to social change which generates the social capital for community development and social opportunities, complementing the state and the market forces" (Ochanda, 2003).

Politics adopting TNJC members in Tongaren asserted that God was concerned with the spiritual and material well-being of His people. They referred to a passage from the Bible where God sent Samuel to anoint a king for the Israelites. Tongaren's TNJC political involvement, however, remained minimal. To clarify their place in society and "provide leadership salted with the fear of the Lord," TNJC needed to engage in politics more visibly (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

### **1.10 Economic Transformations in TNJC**

Research showed that TNJC did not participate in traditional economic activities. As they awaited the glory of heaven, the Tongaren members of the TNJC held that simplicity was what they were meant to pursue (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). As a result, they were considered the

poorest of the poor (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). The unemployed, the sick, and those who were uneducated were TNJC's main clientele. These participants appeared uninterested in undertaking any actions that would benefit their financial situation.

TNJC in Tongaren altered and underwent an economic transformation in response to modernization and the complications and uncertainty of life. The informal sector, which was dominated by unemployed people who had to use their ingenuity to make a living, was where TNJC historically found itself starting in early 2011 (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Because they lacked the official education and technical credentials required for the formal "white colour" jobs, they decided to go into self-employment. In the beginning, TNJC members purposefully chose not to send their kids to school out of fear of discrimination and concern that they could pick up wrong morals (Murumwa, O.I, 2022, June 9). They started raising their kids using a "hands-on" method. As a result, the father's profession was typically almost effortlessly passed down to the male children (Mukire, O.I, 2022, June 9). This explains why members of TNJC possess expert artist talent in a variety of vocations, including carpentry, masonry, stone dressing, and tailoring. Considering that the majority of businesses are open on Saturdays and Sundays, it should be noted that the formal sector had various requirements that would force them to violate the Sabbath. Additionally, some workplace dress codes might undoubtedly exclude TNJC members. As a result, the unorganized sector developed into a successful career that matched their level of spirituality and financial prosperity.

Starting in 2012, Tongaren members changed and began to be more critical of the ideology of its founder, Eliud Wekesa, who believed that the materialist world was wicked and temporary. Many elite TNJC members began to engage in many economic activities beyond the straightforward farming methods of their early forebears (Murumwa, O.I, 2022, June 9). By 2011, a large portion of TNJC members held the view that success and money were gifts from God, and that man must work hard to achieve prosperity to experience life to the fullest. Their commitment to integrity, honesty, and trust propelled many of them to greater economic success across a range of industries. As a result of this shift, numerous TNJC of Tongaren members amassed wealth and power, which eventually led to greater socioeconomic mobility in the community.

Contrasting sharply with proto-TNJC members who lived in abject poverty as a result of their conviction that the universe was evil and temporal were the current TNJC members of Tongaren's positive socioeconomic mobility. One of the doctrines of the TNJC is that money is the source of all evil, according to an elder in this village who defined TNJC members as people who rarely wear boots or shoes, and require that buildings be constructed of local materials (Key Informant 22, O.I 2023, January, 2). The TNJC in Tongaren underwent significant changes as a result of this good fortune, the ascent of the TNJC elites in 2011, and the successful eradication of the social stigma of exclusivity and isolation from the rest of society.

By 2011, the TNJC community had to quickly adjust if it wanted to keep up with the rest. They actively participated in the construction of churches and schools and raised money to help impacted members with their medical expenses. Many constructed decent, long-lasting homes back home. Many people moved into cities in quest of work and business prospects.

In 2020, the group's leader, Eliud Wekesa, created a philosophy encouraging his followers to adopt a habit of properly managing their finances. This then had the effect of stimulating savings, investment, and economic expansion. The church employed Mary Muloli, a

businesswoman in the Tongaren settlement of Lukhokhwe, to collect and hold member contributions. Members took out loans against this cash and repaid them with negligible interest (Muloli, O.I, 2022, June 9). Many people first perceived the TNJC movement as an organization of the uneducated and underprivileged members of society (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

This has since changed since the church has always taken the lead in praising government activity that affects all sectors of the economy. The church offered alternatives to the methods used by the secular sector to address the nation's socioeconomic problems. This is accomplished through their transcendental power-based spiritual teachings, which provide the underprivileged with hope, meaning, and purpose (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Due to their commitment to integrity, a strong work ethic, and altruism, Tongaren's TNJC members' social interactions and upward economic mobility are still influenced by their faith and culture. The movement placed high importance on morality and good work ethics, appealing to people's consciences and fostering healthy social relationships that promote effectiveness and peacebuilding. The majority of TNJC members in Tongaren have remained proactive in supporting economic progress in the nation as a result of the economic transformations that have been observed in the church, "which has resulted in their liberation and spiritual gratification," in the larger context.

### **1.11 Organizational Structure of TNJC in Tongaren**

Tongaren's New Jerusalem Church was founded as a group of people without a formalized hierarchy of authority or membership procedures. It was once available to anybody who repented of their sins and embraced Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, but it had no written rules or restrictions (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Eliud Wekesa, who presided over the TNJC in the past, would issue directives after receiving them from the Holy Spirit.

Gradually, the TNJC changed to become a fully-fledged ministry with a hierarchy of leadership and central administration (Ibid). However, it must be kept in mind that the TNJC faith featured elements of the Luhya traditional religion, which are also visible in its organizational structure and leadership. For instance, as there are Angels and Archangels, TNJC fellowships are leader-centered and have senior leaders in addition to their founder. The fact that everyone was wearing kanjus suggested that there was no obvious separation between priests and laypeople (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The formal hierarchy for administrative tasks and a religious arm that deals with solely religious issues make up the two levels of church government. While the latter involved evangelistic work, discipline, planning, and officiating at ceremonies like baptism, marriage, priestly ordination, and funerals, the former involved general administration, including building the Church's facilities and liaising with the local authorities and government on all official matters and issues relating to the welfare of the entire community (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). The Chairman, who is the organization's originator, as well as a Secretary General and Treasurer made up the administrative staff. Their founder, who is still the baptizer, a preacher, and a prayer leader, was present in the religious spheres.

The chairperson was always its founder and general leader, and their responsibilities included praying for the congregation and officiating special events including weddings, ordinations, baptisms, and the dedication of newly constructed church facilities. Since the TNJC

was established in 2011, Eliud Wekesa has served as its first chairman (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

In addition to leading burial rites and the local congregation and overseeing church services, the founder also baptized new believers. A preacher's duties included preaching and delivering sermons on Sundays, while a prayer leader was in charge of leading the church community in prayer (Lucia, O.I, 2022, June 9). The church angels who served as the founder's aides and the authors of his impending bible were other notable individuals.

A new leadership hierarchy was proposed with the rise of the elite class of 20s at TNJC. The TNJC of Tongaren was compelled by this to accept the "formalization of the church activities as part of the wider trends towards realism" (Rukioya, 2012). In 2018, a new hierarchy of Angels, Disciples, Pastors, and Deacons was established (Nelima, O.I., 2022, June 9). In response to shifting social trends, the TNJC of Tongaren had to rebuild its churches from temporary structures with mud walls and grass-thatched roofs to permanent structures with exquisite architecture. Small groups of TNJC followers used to gather outdoors on Sundays for services, while others could be seen preaching, singing, marching in processions, and praying on roundabouts, under trees, and along roadsides (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Nelima a member of TNJC, greed this claim by saying:

Due to the availability of knowledgeable staff, TNJC publicly conducted crusades, or preaching and evangelizing to everyone regardless of their ethnicity (Nelima, O.I., 2022, June 9).

The movement grew rapidly once the first generation of TNJC elites emerged, both in urban and rural areas, proving the organization's viability in the Kenyan spiritual market. Nevertheless, this expansion has been continual and intensive, with smaller units arising from mother bodies and each taking on distinctive names (Nelima, O.I., 2022, June 9).

The TNJC in Tongaren offered a celebratory religion distinguished by extraordinary dancing, singing, and drumming. The ethos and rhetoric of TNJC are centred on the appropriate use of spiritual music, hymns, and sacred language as a conduit for revelation. They expressed their practices and beliefs through song and dance (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). The forceful usage of the drum, combined with handclapping, dancing, and foot-stomping, is a common element in TNJC tunes and lovely melodies. Because of the TNJC music's intensity, pace, and enthusiasm, African spirit can be seen in the songs and dance. The TNJC holds the opinion that ferocious drumming keeps evil spirits at bay (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). He further claims: This has become part of us anyway. This is more of our identity. Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The rise of an elite class in Tongaren in the 1920s that was educated, committed, and focused saw a major divergence from the previous singing and dancing to the TNJC spiritual hymns. The singing and dancing of TNJC religious songs were altered by the younger generation of gospel performers. They sought to modernize tired hymns by transforming them with the use of contemporary instruments like the guitar (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). They also created and recorded gospel music with hip-hop tunes in Kiswahili and English, which has gained popularity with the general public. The young TNJC members made this daring effort to counter the prevalent narrative that painted them as primitive and uneducated.



### **1.12 The Position of Women in TNJC in Tongaren**

The Tongaren TNJC assigned women secondary duties to the men. Instead of being at the core of the church and society, they remained on the periphery (Lucia, O.I, 2022, June 9). They were largely sympathetic and lacked a voice in the church hierarchy (Lucia, O.I., 2022). As was already said, the TNJC faith draws heavily from the Luyah traditional religious structure, where women were subordinate to men. The Bukusu women were barred from religious careers like sacrifices due to gender inequality, but they were heavily involved in household tasks like cooking, raising children, and keeping the family together (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

To generate and preserve life, as well as to contribute to the instillation of socio-religious values and morals in the family and society, we as women have traditionally played caregiving roles that have placed us in a unique and crucial position (Nanyama, O.I, 2022, June 9). The political, social, economic, and religious structures of Bukusu society were therefore controlled by men (Nanyama, O.I, 2022, June 9).

In the TNJC, women have generally supported men and have not participated fully in church or organizational decision-making (Nanjala, O.I, 2022, June 9). Mikaili a woman leader in the church claims:

The women in TNJC provide spiritual and moral support in the church through prayers and songs, just like the men do. (Mikaili, O.I, 2022, June 9)

Additionally, women have been given a strange role in helping the founder write his next bible. This is clear when people are spotted taking notes on the preacher's sermons during church sessions. Angels are under the direction of a woman named Topistar, an archangel. She is designated as the traveller who hears guidance from God and the group's founder Eliud Wekesa. It is important to note that Topistar was a well-liked angel who had exceptional spiritual charm, which led TNJC members to elect her to a leadership position (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The example of Topistar shows that women are an integral, vital, and significant force behind the life of TNJC, even though the TNJC faith does not believe that women are capable of handling leadership roles in the church. Women were not left behind during the rise of the TNJC elites. Since then, enlightened women from the TNJC have remained steadfast in their support of women's participation in church service.

Since 2011, a large number of enlightened women from the TNJC have actively participated in community service with courage, conviction, energy, and strength (Nasike, O.I, 2022, June 9).

They participated in communal worship by using the Holy Spirit's gifts, such as prophecy and healing. A few ladies in TNJC "Performed acts of healing and driving away evil spirits" in Tongaren, according to Wekesa (O.I, 2022, June 9).

As gifts from God's spirits that enlighten power, women are given a central and revered role in the church's healing ministries, worship, and social life. Tongaren's TNJC restricts women to jobs including child care, teaching, and maintaining the property's cleanliness. Lucia, a TNJC respondent, stated:

Women in “TNJC play a vital role in the church. For instance, some are chosen to be leaders after being put under observation for a long and proved to be leading a good family life. They teach moral conduct to the children, lead in songs and prayers as well as maintain the neatness of the church. Women are resourceful problem solvers and therefore spirited social justice leaders who serve with a servant’s heart for healing and restoration of justice in the community. They are well recognized when it comes to receiving the Holy Spirit because it is said that men receive him first and women later but the Holy Spirit possesses the latter more because they will speak in tongues in long prayers. During functions in the church, women who prepare food for the congregation must be married “(Lucia, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The role of women in TNJC women in Tongaren should not be disregarded in light of the aforementioned topic. According to Uzukwu (2012), "Women are the pillars all over the world; they bear witness to the image of God within them and the hope and renewal for the church rests within this witness." The status of women in many churches continues to be one of the most divisive topics in gender-power politics both inside and outside of the church because "history has it that the church too cannot be absolved from the evils of inflicting lamentable injustices on women" (Mupangwa, 2021). This is true although "women comprise the large majority of active church members and are the sustaining force in almost every congregation" (Kainerugaba, 2013).

Many churches have failed to adequately accept and respond to women's gifts by marginalizing them in significant areas of involvement, although they are prepared for and interested in very demanding and hard roles. However, "women are still the majority in the spiritual and liturgical life of the church" (Uzukwu, 2012). Given that "many Christian churches and denominations reserve their priesthoods or equivalent positions to men," the complete ordination of women in church leadership positions has generated controversy. According to some Christian sects, women have a lower status because of a divinely ordained hierarchy (Chireshe, 2012). "A visitor from another planet would find it odd that, although women make up the majority of churchgoers, religious beliefs either do not place a high value on female sex or, at the very least, have been misconstrued over the years to assign women a subservient position in religious rites. They are no longer permitted to administer sacraments or lead religious services (Clarke, 2006). In TNJC in Tongaren, this was the situation.

TNJC women have not had a voice in the church hierarchy despite their strong spirituality and acknowledged service to the church. However, as they carry out these responsibilities, they come to be recognized as being able to provide charismatic leadership services at various levels. Because of Topistar's magnetism, more women ought to hold leadership positions at TNJC (Nanjala, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The year 2011 marked a turning point in the history of TNJC as the educated elite began to emerge and things started to improve. Since that time, women in the church have had more status and power than ever before. The place of women in the contemporary TNJC in Tongaren is fascinating. Women have significant visibility inside the prestigious TNJC, participate in decision-making, and hold some level of influence (BBC Swahili Magazine, 2019). During this time, women from the TNJC played important positions in both the informal and formal economic sectors, much like their male counterparts. They ran businesses, participated in fundraising efforts, sewn, and baked cakes, and ran families. Numerous people found

employment in the government, education, and religion, actively contributing to the country's economy.

The role of women in TNJC has changed as a result of the significant changes the globe is going through as a result of industrialization, formal education, the commercialization of the economy, feminism, and other modern social factors. Gender roles are undergoing significant transformations in both the secular and religious spheres and TNJC-informed women are speaking out with a new intensity and voice as they continue to praise men's leadership.

### **1.13 Other Socio-religious Transformations**

The TNJC community experienced changes in its worship practices, such as the introduction of contemporary music, the use of multimedia technologies, or modifications in liturgical formats. These changes reflect a desire to engage with younger generations or to adapt to evolving cultural contexts. Socio-religious transformations within the TNJC involve an increased emphasis on community engagement and outreach (Wekesa, O.I 2023, January, 2). This includes initiatives to address social issues, support charitable causes, or actively participate in community development projects. TNJC members prioritize social justice, compassion, and making a positive impact on society.

The TNJC community may experience socio-religious transformations through the integration of cultural elements and practices into their religious expressions. This could involve incorporating traditional songs, dances, or ceremonies into worship services, recognizing the value of indigenous cultural practices, and promoting cultural identity alongside the Christian faith. This includes incorporating local cultural elements into worship services, rituals, or celebrations, while still maintaining the core Christian teachings and beliefs (Murumwa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

**Gender Roles and Equality:** Socio-transformations within the TNJC involve changes in attitudes and practices regarding gender roles and equality. There is increased emphasis on (Lucia, O.I, 2022, June 9) promoting gender equality, recognizing the value and equal worth of both men and women in the church and society, and empowering women to take on leadership roles within the TNJC.

TNJC members participate in interfaith dialogue and engagement with members of other religious communities. This involves seeking common ground, fostering understanding, and working towards peace and harmony among different religious groups. Over time, there are theological reflections and discussions within the TNJC community that lead to shifts in understanding or interpretations of certain aspects of Christian doctrine. This results in adjustments in the teachings or emphasis on particular theological beliefs or practices.

### **1.14.0 The Impact of TNJC in the Kenyan Society**

TNJC in Tongaren under the foundation and leadership of Eliud Wekesa emerged in 2011 due to the religious-cultural crisis with the missionary-founded churches in Tongaren. This movement did not decline during the modernization period but it has since continued to reach and convert many into its faith. TNJC has contributed immensely to the spirituality and preservation of values and traditional institutions of its adherents in Tongaren, Bungoma County.

Motivated by the Social movement theory, Tilly observes that many social movements

throughout history have emerged and dramatically changed the societies in which they occurred. Tilly (2004) argues that social movements are triggered by incentives created by political opportunities, combining conventional and challenging forms of action and building on social networks and cultural frames. This is the case of TNJC as the movement penetrated the minds of the Bukusu people of Tongaren through contextualization of the Bible truth and de-westernization of the missionary church culture. Hence, they prevailed in interpreting the Bible from the Africans' perspective.

The relevance of TNJC is therefore obvious in the entire life of TNJC members of Tongaren. Its relevance entirely ranges from their culture, spirituality, politics, social life, and economy, to education which is attributed to three main factorial levels which include the individual level, the social level, and lastly the institutional level. It is therefore evident that the relevance of TNJC has led to its proliferation and hence has attracted numerous memberships from all walks of life in Bukusuland. Interestingly, some of both the missionary churches and NRMS have taken into consideration incorporating some of the ideals of TNJC into their churches, especially in the areas of respect for some of the African cultures they found compatible with the Christian Bible.

#### **1.14.1 Individual level – Healing, spirituality, and ethics**

##### **1.14.2 Healing**

This study revealed that TNJC's worldview includes various elements of the African spiritual realm such as the belief in spiritual forces and a strong relationship with the ancestors (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Through this worldview, two classifications of diseases can be distinguished: 'Natural diseases' and diseases related to the spiritual world (Phiri, 2016). This implies that spiritual, psychological, physical, and material aspects of life as well as social relations can cause diseases (Pretorius 2007; Frost, 2016).

A central focal point in TNJC activities, hence, is healing. Healing among TNJC members can be seen as a process to support and encourage their members to overcome conditions in their lives others perceive as deficient. According to TNJC, the Spiritual forces that could be dismissed as superstition from a Western perspective are part of daily reality for many people. It is thus fundamentally important to take this perception of the world seriously and to take it into account in the case of cooperation with TNJC (Gräb 2015). It is especially because TNJC just like other AICs, does not reject this set of beliefs that they reach so many people. Bompani (2010) points out:

They take the negative forces within African cosmology seriously by responding to real problems as perceived [...], namely witchcraft, sorcery, and evil spirits, understanding that it is acceptable to interpret socio-economic hardships and deprivation in contemporary society within the context of adverse cosmic forces. The idea that AICs are considered experts in granting people protection and fortification against the powers of evil, accounts to a large degree for their popularity and growth (p. 309).

Healing is one of the main reasons why many members join TNJC (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). According to Barasa, TNJC has provided a concrete means to deal with the challenges since their activities are all directed towards enabling their members to lead a good life (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Hence, they are a strong source of agency over their situations. They do not

only take care of the spiritual needs of their church members but they also offer these services to members of other denominations. TNJC members often offer healing and other church activities to non-members because TNJC just like any other AICs support to the individual is wholistic, relevant, and effective (Bompani 2010).

### **1.15 Mediators of transformation: Transformation of members' lives**

TNJC's transformative potential is highly emphasized especially in contexts of marginalization and discrimination. As experienced in other denominations due to persistent economic and social structures, TNJC enables their members to affirm their own (positive) identity (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). While in other denominations, the congregants are discriminated against in ethnic communities, in TNJC, the adherents were respected among their fellow church members and could occupy respected positions in their churches. Identity and social status continue to be important features to members of this potential church. The field study provided several examples of the transformation of lives through church membership.

Notions of salvation are related to people's present lives. God is considered to have the power to provide deliverance from the adversities people face and protect them from negative spiritual forces (Barnard *et al.* 2014). TNJC thus offers protection and support in various situations and challenges their members could face. During such adversities, they contribute to the stabilization of their members' lives, equip them with resilience (Meyer 2004), and enable them to lead their lives out of their power. In many cases, this is conducive to material success, especially in TNJC where a gospel of prosperity is preached and a high degree of self-reliance and entrepreneurship are advocated and practised (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

### **1.16 Moral Ethics**

Adherence to a specific ethical code is seen as proof of successful healing and true membership of TNJC of Tongaren in Bungoma Sub County. This implies the prohibition of violence, crime, and drug and substance consumption, the prohibition of behaviours and aspects considered as a hindrance to a good life, gambling, attending secular parties, and observance of strict sex morals (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Far from only being restrictive TNJCs' ethics also include rules for social interaction. Wekesa notes that the members should adhere to strict ethical codes besides adherence to the above-mentioned rules. Virtues such as love, compassion, mutual support, respect, adherence to certain biblical commandments regarding social interaction (The Ten Commandments, Romans 13:1–8; Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 4:17), honesty and peacefulness were named as the most important values. A member, Sumbayi explained ways in which the church enabled him to deal with his family problems. He responded that:

I was having a family issue and so anger was cropping up daily. My marriage was on the verge of breaking because of a mistake I made. That anger was there because she was threatening to go back to her parent's home with the children. No one close to me was willing to resolve our issue. Not even our village elders. They all claimed I had to learn it from the hard way this time around. That anger was just on me. It was not easy for me. There are these social problems that cause depression and anger. So, to guide you, to say, you must leave this and do this that is where the church has taken a stand and said you cannot deal with anger by

drinking alcohol. To deal with that anger you must get your background. And that is where sometimes, spiritually, you need someone who can guide you, and lead you to your culture. So that is where our church came in to play its role of reuniting my family. Just after you get your answers, you must forget about your past. This is where I am now. I am staying with my wife and children and we are happy. It has helped my wife not to have a grudge against me and I promised to love and appreciate her all the time (Sumbayi, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Many church members joined TNJC because their relationships had improved since; at least their previous behaviours had changed (Wekesa O.I, 2022, June 9). They were more balanced, more patient, and more tolerant than before. Moreover, Bompani (2010) points out that New Religions put a strong emphasis on good citizenship.

### **1.17 Meditators of Social Change**

The role of the church in any given community is to support the individual member both at the spiritual level, for example with prayers, and through solidarity, consolation, and counselling (Schlemmer, 2008). The dense social structure of TNJC provides stability and in other cases, it serves as a 'place to feel at home' is a very important aspect as far as individual well-being is concerned (Kilonzo, 2010). Some members of TNJC located in different places for reasons known to them may face different adversities and conflicts and TNJC provides safe spaces (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Pretorius (2007) describes the New Religions as "sheltered corners" in an ever-changing urban milieu'. TNJC offers a 'portable framework of values' as their structures simultaneously reflect those of traditional communities (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9) and adapt them to the actual living situation (Urban, 2015). It is thus no coincidence that often their members flourish in towns. The church empowers its members to recognize and develop their own positive identity in the context of a changing society (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). By providing a social network of security and support TNJC empowers them to deal with the challenges of their living situation and to improve their lives (Mohr *et. al*, 2007).

### **1.18.0 Social level – Social capital and socio-political attitudes**

#### **1.18.1 Social capital**

Social networks are found in any group setting or community founded specifically for mutual support guided by strong bonding forces and based on trust (Masondo 2014). Social capital is defined as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words to membership to a group' (Hauberer, 2014). Hence social capital considers an individual as part of a group and not to society as a whole (DeFilippis, 2001) that have a high propensity to support one another (Meyer 2004).

TNJC also has such social networks that are important sources of social capital for their members. These networks are important, especially in contexts of adversity. The members benefit from the congregation in cases where (spiritual) guidance and practical support are needed (Murumwa, O.I, 2022, June 9). In cases of unexpected negative events (such as deaths in the family or loss of employment) the member benefits from spiritual, physical, and material

support. According to Muloli a member of this movement:

Nearly every member fosters a practice of visiting and praying for sick people – often irrespectively of whether they are church members or not. (Muloli, O.I, 2022, June 9)

Moreover, TNJC provides safe spaces for its members and promotes a culture of non-violence in the communities (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Many members of TNJC form informal savings groups (commonly known as chamas), to which they regularly contribute a certain amount of money. The total sum contributed will be paid to each one in turns or to all of them at the end of a certain accepted period, for example at the end of the year. Also, during burials, they provide financial and practical support to the affected members of TNJC, even though they are normally not organized by church structures. TNJC are important sources of information for their members, for example about housing and employment. During the collection of data, 20% of the interviewees stated that other church members helped them to find work or construct both temporary and permanent houses.

### **1.18.2 TNJC and Politics**

While AICs are traditionally portrayed as apolitical, recent research indicates that this hypothesis has to be differentiated (Bompani 2010; Heuser 2008; Pretorius 2007). TNJC might be less involved in national political debates than Mission Churches, but they are active at the local level (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). As part of the poor segments of society, they know the immediate needs and make them heard. According to Bompani (2010) AICs are comparable to social movements but, unlike those, do not separate religious and political areas:

Most of the church members [...] defined the religious community as a network of solidarity to fight for their proper social rights, like education, health, knowledge about HIV, economic support, and housing. (p. 666)

Through the high degree of group coherence and trust TNJC members are conducive to collective action in the interest of their members as well as the community (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). This especially concerns local service delivery issues like housing, education, water, and health services as well as issues such as crime and HIV and AIDS, which directly affect the lives of their members.

### **1.18.3 TNJC and gender**

The TNJC advocates for mutual respect regardless of gender. Although their take on gender roles is generally conservative, they promote a healthy and peaceful family life and often take a stand against domestic violence. The church offers counselling specifically concerning marriage or family problems. It should be noted that there were fewer family conflicts among the church members during field study and men tended less to beat their wives. Considering the high prevalence of domestic violence in Western Kenya this alone has to be acknowledged as a positive development.

Nonetheless, concerning TNJC's view on gender relations and women's position in the church women are allowed to occupy leadership positions (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). Especially the founder's wife often takes on responsibility for activities like leading the women's league and conducting certain ceremonies or services in the absence of her husband Eliud Wekesa.

When it comes to the role of prophets there is consensus in TNJC. Both men and women are given this position. Field data showed that women played an important role in this church, even though they did not hold leading positions. In TNJC women form the majority of active church members for they both build and sustain the strong network of support within the church and those members who benefit most from it.

## **1.19.0 Institutional level – Notions of development and activities implemented by TNJC**

### **1.19.1 Churches**

To date, little research exists about TNJC and its development. The church leaders guided by their founder Eliud Wekesa prioritized material needs as the greatest problems that the church members faced. The most frequent problems mentioned are unemployment and poverty. These two problems were seen as existential challenges in people's daily lives. During fieldwork, it was frequently mentioned that the church is trying to respond to all the needs of its members and the communities – spiritual, economic, and social. Development-related activities related to spiritual activities included activities such as Sunday school, religious programs on community radio, praying for people, and offering support during funeral services. Several church leaders understood it as their Christian duty to support their members – and often also non-members – in both areas. Moreover, the activities in these two areas are closely interrelated. Church leaders believe that 'you cannot preach the gospel to a person with an empty stomach' and 'I believe that if you preach the Word it has to be made practical'. Eliud Wekesa further referred to John 13:35 where Jesus explains that people will recognize His disciples by the fact that they love each other. He added:

And of course, love is not just love. Love has to be accompanied by actions. So I think there is an interaction between what we preach to what we do. Because what we do is what we are preaching, yes: love, and hope (John 13:35)" (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

In cooperation with faith-based organizations, international development agencies normally require development-related activities to be separated from spiritual or worship activities. This was posed for discussion with TNJC founder and liturgical leaders. While some thought that a separation would be possible or even helpful in reaching more people, others were skeptical. Among the leaders interviewed two church leaders indicated that such separation would be possible and three leaders indicated that it would not be possible. The main argument against a separation according to Nasike was that:

People need both to have a good life the spiritual and the material need to be balanced (Nasike, O.I, 2022, June 9).



Moreover, it was argued that to produce lasting effects through development interventions, it is essential to change the whole person and accompany her or him in this process of transformation. If a person does not only receive skills or a good education but also spiritual and moral guidance from the church, he or she will use these skills and knowledge for the good of others. This person's success, hence, will benefit the community. Others pointed to a practical aspect: in many cases the church building if the church has a building at all – is the only facility available where activities could take place. Thus a complete separation between spiritual and social activities might simply not be possible because of spatial facts.

TNJC is greatly involved in numerous activities related to the needs of its membership and the wider communities. The structure and scope of these activities vary greatly. The development-related activities of the churches are usually run by the church founder, leaders, pastors, and volunteers). Specific committees for the implementation and administration of the activities are formed; few formal and professional organizational structures for development activities are put in place. Nonetheless, some activities such as savings groups and burial societies are organized by members themselves. The most common activities implemented by TNJC described are the following:

Relief-related activities such as feeding schemes and donations of clothes for poor community members and homeless people are mentioned most often. This activity was relatively easy to implement among all the social activities. Even in the smaller churches where larger activities like skills training are not feasible, an activity like the distribution of food can become active. However, according to the leaders. The activity may not be considered a development activity to outsiders, but it provides an entry point for development-related activities that may follow once the respective structures have been established (Mikaili, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Counselling is also offered in nearly all situations of the life of TNJC members. Particularly, intra-family conflicts and HIV were mentioned as the most important areas of the church counselling activities. Through counseling TNJC helps the members to deal with adversities they experience in their lives. This activity is closely related to the spiritual support church members experience; however, it is featured also as an institutionalized activity for members and non-members.

Even though HIV and AIDS are often still perceived as taboo, the stigmatization of affected people continues to be a serious problem. Awareness of the impact of the disease is very high in TNJC. The church is reported to have invited nurses to talk about health issues such as HIV and AIDS and healthy alimentation. Three out of the five interviewed church leaders underlined that lack of knowledge is a serious problem concerning HIV and AIDS and health issues in general.

Activities specifically targeting youth, such as music, sports, drama, and youth services are implemented by TNJC. The church offers activities aimed at young people and homeless children within the congregation and the community at large. Several interviewed leaders underlined that they try to get young people from the streets to prevent them from taking drugs or getting involved in criminal activities – two aspects mentioned as major problems in people's lives. The focus on young people is also visible in TNJC's support of education. Even though the

average educational levels among members of TNJC are much lower than in other AICs and the Mission Churches, it emerges clearly that TNJC values education highly. Bursary programmes from the local governments reach students within TNJC who in many cases have parents without an academic education (or, in fact, even with limited or no school education). Several bursaries are given to individual students at secondary or tertiary levels.

The size of these bursary programs varies from the respective supporters to individuals by the church to large-scale programs. Larger NRMs run their churches and schools. Five of the churches surveyed individually run such institutions. Church-run schools are particularly important in rural and poor areas that lack such facilities. They provide alternatives to often poor-run government primary and secondary educational institutions. These church schools and crèches are usually open to non-members. One church leader mentioned that the majority of students at his church's primary school did not belong to his church.

Coherent with the identified need for skills, TNJC also encourages their youths to join opened training centres where skills like sewing or basic computer and entrepreneurial skills are taught. Some of the members who might have dropped out of school (maybe due to lack of school fees or early marriages) have become active in this area, for example by buying sewing machines and offering sewing courses to the church's members.

Once in a while, the church leaders indicated that they run entrepreneurship and leadership training seminars for their members. This is particularly relevant because, as Schlemmer (2008) points out, a considerable percentage of AIC goers are and will continue to be excluded from the formal labour market. Schlemmer also notes that government programmes often do not reach them and concludes that people are left on their own and their initiative to improve their economic situation. TNJC, therefore according to Nelima, plays an important role of:

Improving the socioeconomic conditions, not only by building networks of solidarity and trust in the communities but also by supporting and accompanying people in their economic development (Nelima, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Here, TNJC is directly responding to what they perceive as the greatest challenges of unemployment and poverty. They seek to enable their members to take initiative instead of waiting for employment opportunities to come. The church members already active in formal and informal business activities are important resource persons and multipliers. The church hence makes use of this expertise and facilitates partnerships between established business people and members trying to start a business or by facilitating intra-church networks of business owners. Three out of the five church leaders interviewed are also business owners. This relates to the connection between the entrepreneurial act of opening a church and the entrepreneurial act of starting a business described by Schlemmer (2008).

Nearly all the interviewed church leaders indicated that their activities are not exclusive to members. Especially small-scale projects like donations (food, clothing) and counselling. The church runs outreach programs that explicitly address people outside the congregation. Church members contact non-members to inform them about the church and its activities. Sometimes they also ask people about their problems and needs and provide help and support. Two church leaders highlighted that the congregation regularly donates food, clothing, or money for school

fees to the people living in the homes close to their settlements.

### **1.19.3 Religious involvement**

The local authorities accused the leader of the TNJC movement in Tongaren of being blasphemous, according to the movement's history. As a result, the government destroyed their houses of worship and harassed and punished their leader and followers through arrests, incarceration, fines, and other measures. These TNJC members were under suspicion at the time for collaborating with and supporting their founder Eliud Wekesa's claims to be Jesus Christ. Most probably, this was because Eliud Wekesa was a strong religious leader who claimed that he was the incarnate Jesus Of Nazareth referring to himself as 'Jesus Of Tongaren'. He is since referred to as '*Yesu wa Tongareni*' by his followers. The members of TNJC claim that they did not view their leader as claiming to be Jesus Christ but instead according to Nanyama a member of TNJC:

He is the true promised biblical Messiah who only came to fulfil the Old Testament Prophecies (Nanyama, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Members of the Tongaren National Joint Council (TNJC), led by Mwalimu, have been primarily Bukusu because they haven't been able to reach out to other ethnic groups in search of converts. They have been actively involved in projects supported by the government, such as the building of Harambee schools, cattle dipping facilities, churches, and the planting of cash crops like coffee and tea. The majority of TNJC members in Tongaren believed that their spiritual well-being should come before all other considerations (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). According to the TNJC:

This life was only temporary; thus one should live in a way that would eventually result in salvation (Muloli, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The church exhorts followers to raise their level of living and educate their children (Ibid). They enrolled the elderly in adult literacy programs while encouraging their children to pursue education to the highest levels. It is sufficient to say, in conclusion, that TNJC Tongaren members were more deeply and realistically concerned with their fellow members' social and spiritual wellness than political activity. The TNJC movement engaged in politically motivated social programs or government-initiated development projects to enhance the welfare of their constituents.

### **1.19.4 Economic Participation**

From the neighbouring communities in Tongaren, TNJC was viewed as being: "Perpetually sluggish and avoiding work" (Nanjala, O.I, 2022, June 9). Additionally, they opted out of owning property and participating in traditional economic activities (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). They maintained their poverty because they believed in simplicity as they awaited their ascension to celestial glory and felt no need to change their situation (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Since its founding, TNJC members have emerged from self-isolation and started collaborating with the rest of society as they seek other economic endeavours beyond basic

farming methods in response to changing conditions. Murumwa a member agrees that they have been able to start up Self Help Groups that have played significant roles in their lives and of their members too. He claims:

By starting self-help projects and cooperative societies, they have actively contributed to the government's efforts to increase productivity and thereby the welfare of the populace (Murumwa, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Their belief in hard work, honesty, and trust catapulted many into greater economic achievements in varied areas.

Many people gathered riches and power in society as the elite TNJC class of 2011 emerged. Their enthusiasm for making money was evidence of how TNJC had evolved into contributing members of society. Many people in Tongaren engaged in trade activities and got along well with other people in the community. The early TNJC members' reputation for exclusivity and isolation was successfully eradicated by this transition. By 2011, the TNJC community in Tongaren had quickly caught up with the rest and built more gorgeous churches, permanent residences, and other structures, while others had relocated to urban locations in search of work and business prospects. However, despite the nation's industrial sector economic boom fueling significant urban expansion, by 2020, the majority of TNJC members had primarily remained in rural areas.

Overall, the TNJC of Tongaren, led by Eliud Wekesa, has made a significant contribution to the economic well-being of the community by valuing education and pursuing economic endeavours to reduce poverty among its members in the Tongaren countryside. Many TNJC members got interested in dairy and poultry farming, cash and subsistence farming, and commerce, while others found work in the nearby Kamukuywa and Kimilili towns and other areas.

#### **1.19.4 Social integration**

The TNJC movement in Tongaren largely derived from the traditional religion of the Bukusu despite being Christian in name and doctrine. The theories and beliefs of the Bukusu have had a significant influence on TNJC spirituality (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). They held the view that:

God (Were) was the Supreme Being and the Originator of Everything (Njukhilile, O.I, 2022, June 9).

The Bukusu culture also serves as the foundation for the TNJC's belief in prophesy, ritual uncleanness, tolerance of polygamy, and adoration of ancestor spirits. This church's explosive expansion is largely attributable to its capacity to spread Christianity in a way that respects each individual's own historical experience and cultural roots.

The family, clan, and council of elders in the TNJC framework of the Bukusu traditional system-maintained coherence and stability in the society. The introduction of missionary church operations in Bukusu territory had profound repercussions that fundamentally altered and shattered the social and religious institutions of the nation. In a time when religion and culture were changing, the TNJC swiftly attracted people who wanted to become Christians but

felt they could not give up parts of their traditional beliefs and practices. Therefore, TNJC presented a novel form of worship that dealt with modern problems and a complex religion that did not demand a complete rupture with the past. The TNJC movement thus gave its followers, who had to adjust to this new perspective, a new spiritual home. For the TNJC members, the significance of such a movement at the time was to:

Draw many people towards our church, and after they join, they join the TNJC community of believers (Samweli, O.I, 2022, June 9).

Being a member of the TNJC required active engagement in all communal activities, including religious gatherings, evangelism, supporting one another with all social and financial issues, and camaraderie (Barasa, O.I, 2022, June 9). The TNJC movement addressed the need for renewal among its members by enacting certain prohibitions. The TNJC forbade the use of narcotics and alcoholic beverages; this practice gave its adherents a fresh outlook on life and a moral code that set them apart from mission Christians.

A progressive explanation of the societal changes brought about by the missionary churches was provided by TNJC members, who made the Christian Gospel message understandable to the people by integrating it with their culture. By reinterpreting and rearranging parts of Christianity's doctrines and customs, the movement also made a significant contribution to the indigenization of Christianity. The TNJC movement was also successful in giving its members a sense of safety, regeneration, and hospitality that was lacking in the mission churches.

## **1.20 Conclusion**

This article had the objective of interrogating the transformation practices of TNJC of Tongaren, in Bungoma County. It was discovered that the Tongaren civilization has changed as a result of TNJC. The church has changed and transformed since it adopted a conservative approach to worship, diet, politics, music, and education.

## **1.21. Recommendations**

The study recommends that NRMs should be allowed to promote more socio-religious transformations. At first, the TNJC movement was derided and even mocked since some of its members refused to shake hands, ate food cooked in regular cooking oil, refused to cast ballots, and refused to take their kids to school. Its original isolationist approach and obstinate refusal to cooperate led to increased social disdain. Nevertheless, due to the movement's ongoing development, this has changed. Despite these flaws, the TNJC movement has adjusted and undergone modifications in response to the demands of the times to stay relevant in a shifting world. As a result, the church has continued to draw members from other mainline Western Christian denominations as well as the young, old, elite, and ignorant. The movement needs to be considered a phenomenon because it affects the past, present, and future. It reacted against some historical facets, namely the Bukusu customs. Despite its shortcomings, the TNJC movement in Tongaren satisfied the people's needs and ambitions by aiming for a meeting with the present and the past.

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