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The Roman Catholic Church, Education and Health Care Provision in Meru County- Kenya

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In Kenya, it is the church that complements the government in dealing with diverse issues which are related to citizens. This paper examines the role of the Roman Catholic Church in addressing educational and health issues in Meru County. The historical background of the Ameru, the inroads of the Roman Catholic Missionaries in this county and the various initiatives that have been adopted by the church in educational and health care issues are discussed accordingly. The research was conducted in Meru County and was further corroborated with relevant literature to ascertain the Roman Catholic Church's involvement. It is evident that the church collaborates with the government in the provision of quality education and sustained health care services to the residents of Meru.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the historical background of the Roman Catholic Church, its spread, and the impact that it has played on educational and health issues in Meru County. The name Meru is often used interchangeably to refer to its people and the region that they inhabit. This county is occupied dominantly by the Ameru, who also live in Tharaka Nithi County. The two counties constitute the Catholic Diocese of Meru (Mauta, 2010). The Ameru consist of Igembe, Tigania, Chuka, Muthambi, Imenti, Mwimbi, Tharaka, Igoji, and Miutini sub-ethnic groups. The Kenya Housing and Population Census of 2019 documents that the Ameru comprise 6% of Kenya's population with a population of 1,545,714 million people, out of which six hundred thousand (600,000) people are affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church (Government of Kenya, 2019). The majority of Ameru are subsistence farmers who grow yams, corn, beans, potatoes, sorghum, and millet as their staple foods, while; coffee, tea, bananas, *miraa*, and cotton are their cash crops (Mauta, 2010).

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF AMERU

The indigenous Ameru practised African Traditional Religion before the coming of British colonialists and missionaries in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They occupied the Upper Eastern Province, which comprises the present Meru and Tharaka Nithi Counties (Gituma, 2012). The early missionaries who were sent to Africa by their main churches in Europe to spread Christianity included; the African Inland Mission, Church Missionary Society, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, Consolata Catholic Mission, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventists, and United Methodist Church among others (Micheni, 1988; Nkonge, 2016).

Before the coming of pioneer missionaries in Meru, the local inhabitants practised their indigenous religion. They were led by a religious leader-*Mugwe* who served as the peoples' intermediary and also invoked God's blessings for every important action of the community. Apart from *mugwe*, the Ameru had a council of elders *Njuri Ncheke*, which played a key role in instilling appropriate values into the society (Rimita, 1988). The arrival of European

colonial masters and Christian Missionaries led to the abolishing or changes in some Ameru traditional social and economic activities. They introduced new administrative structures, church attendance, schools, modern health care, and the money economy. It is the Methodist church and Consolata Catholic Missionaries who pioneered the provision of education and health services in Meru County (Gituma, 2012; Itobi, 2015).

The Consolata Catholic Missionary team gained entry into Thigaa and Kinja in Meru on 9th December 1911, which were both located about ten kilometres from *Mutindwa*, the current Meru Town (Mauta, 2010). The initial role of missionaries was to collaborate with the colonial administrators in ruling and converting the local inhabitants to Christianity before extending any further assistance to them (Okon, 2014). At first, the Consolata Catholic missionaries did not receive financial and any favourable administrative support from the commissioner as compared to the United Methodist Church. But, by 1913, they had established four Mission Stations in Igoji, Mujwa, Tigania (Athwana), and Igembe-Amung'enti (Gituma, 2012). In 1926, the Roman Catholic Church had started twenty boys' schools and twelve for girls, a Catechist Training College at Igoji, and an orphanage for both boys and girls at Mujwa Mission. The Prefecture Apostolic of Meru was established in the same year and was later elevated to become the Diocese of Meru on 7th May 1953, as a suffragan of the Archdiocese of Nyeri. Bestone Lorenzo was appointed as the first Bishop in 1954. He commissioned Parish Priests to build churches and establish mission stations within the diocese. Upon his death in 1976, Silas S. Njiru was ordained as the second and first African Bishop of Meru Diocese. He was then succeeded by Salesius Mugambi, who became the second African Bishop in 2004, a position he holds to date -2022 (<https://catholicdioceseofmeru.org>).

The Roman Catholic Church and the Government

In order to understand the role of the Roman Catholic Church in Meru County and other religious institutions' engagement in education and health care, the hybridity theory advanced by Bhabha in 1994 is discussed and applied accordingly (Cooney,

2006; Smith, 2004). The theory is associated with quasi- hybrid non-profit organizations, which tend to place greater emphasis on organizations that arise as voluntary, community, and charitable organizations. The hybridity theory has emerged as a result of the search for new sources of revenue to fund the core values of missions which include; creating subsidies to generate revenue for the parent body (Cooney, 2006; Smith, 2004). The theory underscores the fact that the main role of religious institutions is not only based on development in various aspects, but it is also through spirituality, as exemplified by Jesus Christ's teachings. The hybridity theory confronts different tasks and advocates for equitable resource environments. This does not, however, construe that religious institutions do not advance various social, economic, and political development programmes. This theory thus explains the involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in Meru County in education and health alongside the government.

Roman Catholic Church and Education in Meru County

The history of education in the Meru Diocese can be traced back to the contributions of Fathers Aimé Boot, Tuselli, Balbo, and Olivero, who arrived in Meru on 13th December 1911 (Gituma, 2012). They brought school desks and writing materials which were carried by sixty porters and were used to commission the first schools. A Girls' Elementary School and a Catechist Training Centre, which later developed to become the current Igoji Teachers Training College, were started at Igoji in 1915, while an orphanage was started in 1918 at Mujwa. During World War I (1914-1918), bush schools were started by the Roman Catholic Church Missionaries and they operated at a reduced cost (Gituma, 2012). The age between the two world wars interval (1920-1940) culminated in the establishment of primary schools, which were spearheaded by the Roman Catholic Church. Secondary schools were started after World War II between 1945-1960 (Baur, 1994). But it was only after the attainment of political independence in 1963 that Universities were established in Kenya.

A training centre for artisans and mechanics was established at Mujwa in 1926, while twenty primary schools had been established for boys with

a population of seven hundred and forty (740) learners (Gituma, 2012). Twelve primary schools were also constructed to accommodate one hundred and fifty girls. In 1927, Archbishop Hinsley, the Apostolic delegate to English-speaking Africa, directed all Catholic Mission Schools to emphasize holistic education (Churu, 2009). This form of education was geared toward making all learners be humane and better servants of God, thus attaining a standard Christian civilization. It ensured that each learner found identity, meaning, and purpose in life by connecting to the natural world and the community and maintaining spiritual values (Nyabwari, 2016; Gituma, 2012). The Roman Catholic Missionaries enhanced formal schooling in Meru when Father Malleto was appointed the Religious Superior for Meru in 1937 (Gituma, 2012). But, in 1940, a major drawback in education and missionary endeavour was witnessed when all Consolata Fathers were taken as prisoners to South Africa during the 2nd world war. The missions and schools were run and supervised by untrained African Catechists (Gituma, 2012). At this time, there were 46 schools for both boys and girls.

The further development of schools was witnessed when Lawrence Bessone became the Bishop of Meru in 1954. He constructed more schools that emphasized hygiene, industry, arts, and crafts. These schools were spread in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Meru, which comprises seven deaneries, with two located in Tharaka Nithi County, while five, namely; Tigania, Imenti South, Imenti North, Buuri, and Igembe are in Meru County (Gituma, 2012). These deaneries have well-established structures which are linked to the Bishop's office. The diocese, as of 2022 has 69 parishes out of which 46 are in Meru County, while the rest (23) are in Tharaka Nithi County.

There are two hundred thousand schools and other educational institutions which are sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church worldwide (Hitchock, 2016). The attainment of quality education greatly contributes to social-economic development when people acquire skills that necessitate employment and engagement in agriculture and business (Gituma, 2012). The research findings on education in Meru County in 2022 established that the Ministry of Education has registered many church-run schools in Meru County in cooperation with the

Catholic Diocese of Meru. Nyabwari (2016) argues that education with a holistic approach ensures that each learner is connected to the community, acquires spiritual values, and finds identity, meaning and purpose in life. The tertiary institutions in Meru County offer courses in primary teacher education, diploma in secondary education, early childhood development education, and several technical courses. These institutions include; Fr. Soldati Teachers Training College, Mujwa Technical School, Nkabune Technical Training Institute, and Igoji Teachers Training College. These institutions provide affordable and quality education training not only to the privileged learners but also to the less fortunate members of society. Some vulnerable students get full sponsorship through grants from donors. The vocational training institutes such as Mitunguu, Soldati Vocational College, and Irene School offer courses in hairdressing, beauty care and therapy, building and construction, masonry, welding, and many other artisan courses as determined by the parish council members. These technical courses create job opportunities not only for its graduates but also for other people in the society.

Several driving schools, which include Spiker Driving School have been established in various parishes in the diocese of Meru to train and equip enterprising residents with pertinent professional driving skills that enable many school leavers to secure employment opportunities in the private and public transport sector. There are also numerous free computer literacy classes which are offered, for example, in Mbeu and Maua parishes. School leavers attend computer literacy classes which is a prerequisite in the 21st century.

The Kangeta Parish Demonstration Farms have been established in the diocese of Meru, which trains farmers in modern farming methods in horticulture, floriculture, dairy, and beef cattle rearing. Kamujine Farmers Training Centre, which is located in St Massimo Parish in Tigania Central Sub County teaches requisite skills in kitchen gardening, modern farming methods, and record keeping. This results in increased yields and an abundant harvest of maize, beans, millet, sorghum, and many horticultural products. The skills that the youth acquire from these institutions enable them to initiate pig and chicken rearing projects, tree

nurseries, and hire out tents which they use for their general upkeep and also support other parish programs. A few Roman Catholic Church parishes, such as Mukululu Shrine and Kangeta have built adult learning centres where professionals teach the residents basic literacy skills, bible reading, effective communication, and record-keeping.

The Roman Catholic Church in Meru County also sponsors 410 public and church-run day and boarding primary schools. These learning institutions have alleviated illiteracy leading to the development and maintenance of the once-neglected roads, electricity connectivity, and construction of dispensaries by the government, thereby transforming the lives of its residents. Even though there is no church-run private school in Limbine Parish which is relatively new, it is evident that the Roman Catholic church supports public primary and secondary schools such as Akiithi Primary School and Akiithi Girls Secondary School. These institutions are characterized by standard infrastructural facilities, which include modern and well-stocked libraries, equipped laboratories, information communication centres, and study halls. They also have spacious and well-ventilated classrooms, games equipment and playgrounds. Other schools and colleges run farms where they grow crops and keep livestock, enhancing their learning and financial capacity. In addition, these institutions have well-coordinated discipline committees, vibrant mentorship programmes as well as functional guidance and counselling services for the learners.

The students who learn in the Roman Catholic Church privately sponsored educational institutions such as the Consolata Girls Secondary School, Materi Girls Centre, and Mfariji Girls Secondary School excel in national examinations (Itobi, 2015). They later pursue prestigious courses in tertiary colleges and universities, both locally and abroad. This increases their chances of formal and informal employment, which later translates to economic empowerment. The high enrolment which is witnessed in these institutions is due to improved infrastructure, good services, discipline, life skills education, academic performance, and religious piety which is exhibited positively as the alumni transit to higher education. The learners who go through these schools and tertiary institutions also

attain holistic education through Catholic Social Teaching which is emphasized in Pastoral Programme Instruction.

There also exists an education secretariat in the diocese of Meru, a team of trained clergy who include parish priests and nuns that are acquainted with the Kenyan education system. The secretariat coordinates joint assessment examinations in all Roman Catholic Church parishes and also assesses teachers' and learners' performance. It also solicits funds from donors in Italy, Europe, and the United States of America to run the church-sponsored schools. The high number of learners in Roman Catholic Church educational institutions calls for the employment of more teaching and non-teaching staff who are attracted and retained by positive incentives. These include competitive salaries, loan facilities, and rewards for those who excel. Their dedication further transforms the mission-run and sponsored educational institutions into centres of academic excellence.

The diocese of Meru offers scholarships to needy students in various learning institutions. A few parishes sponsor poor children in the mission schools. A good example is Dumuuru Primary School in Igembe Deanery, which has an enrolment of over 200 learners whose tuition fee is fully paid in addition to feeding the learners (Gituma, 2012). The government also cooperates with the Roman Catholic Church by posting chaplains to church-sponsored government schools in the diocese of Meru who empower learners socially and spiritually. These clergies collaborate with the administration in enhancing the social and spiritual nourishment of learners and they also inculcate appropriate moral values into them (Gituma, 2012). The church also lobbies for the appointment of Board Management members in schools that are sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church. Oftentimes, the Roman Catholic Church clergy are consulted before the head of an institution is posted to or even transferred from a church-sponsored school. It is evident that there are different Education institutions in the diocese of Meru, which includes private Roman Catholic Church secondary schools, primary schools, adult education centres, tertiary colleges, as well as vulnerable and special needs schools.

Roman Catholic Church and Health Care Services

It is noted that apart from the church partnering with the government in offering quality and affordable education in the diocese of Meru, it is also jointly involved in providing good health services. The research in health care provision dates back to the Cathedral Schools, which were transformed into well-integrated networks of Catholic scientists and medieval universities (Ghosh, 2015). Many significant discoveries in medicine and modern science were made by clergymen during the renaissance, when even the Popes supported the study of human anatomy, while artists like Michelangelo advanced the knowledge by sketching cadavers (Ghosh, 2015). The Jesuits (1602 – 1680) further proposed that human beings entered and existed in the blood, while the Augustinians (1822-1884) developed several theories in medicine for the first time in history (Walter, 2007). The inroads of various missionary groups who came to Africa including Kenya, in the early 20th century brought new knowledge in modern medicine apart from spreading the gospel. They included the Church Missionary Society, the Methodists, and the Consolata Catholic Missionaries who came to Meru County in 1911 (Walter, 2007). After two decades of their presence and evangelization, they had spread to most parts of the county.

The history of health facilities was enhanced in Meru County by the Consolata missionaries in October 1947 when Bishop Cavallera was appointed the Apostolic Administrator of Meru (Gituma, 2012). He directed that all mission stations, missionaries' houses, schools, and dispensaries supported by churches should be constructed permanently using stones (Gituma, 2012). This led to the establishment of the first Consolata mission hospital in Nkubu in Meru County in 1948 (Gituma, 2012). The Ministry of Health has further partnered with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Meru in establishing and accrediting more Roman Catholic Church-run hospitals and dispensaries, as discussed below.

Tigania Mission Hospital, which is the Second well-established health facility in the diocese was initiated by Fr. Botta in the mid-1950s and is

currently run by the brothers of St. John of God (Heigh & Botta, 2019). The third health facility is St Anne hospital in Igoji parish, which was founded by Father Ghiladi in 1959. It was initially run by the Consolata Missionaries, but it is currently under the management of the Orione Sisters (Heigh & Botta, 2019). The fourth major health facility is Kiirua Mission Hospital which was started in 1967 as a mere dispensary under Sister Maria Pia, but it is now operated by the Little Sisters of St. Theresa (Heigh & Botta, 2019). This hospital has recorded tremendous growth over the years and it is currently the largest and most preferred mission hospital not only in Meru but also in Tharaka Nithi and Isiolo counties. The fifth medical facility is the Cottolengo Hospital in Chaaria Parish which is run by the Cottolengo brothers, while the Consolata Hospital situated near the Diocese of Meru Headquarters is the latest fully-fledged modern hospital (<http://chaariahospitalcottolengo.org>).

The largest referral Catholic-sponsored mission hospitals are located in Kiirua, Cottolengo- Chaaria, and Consolata. Nkubu hospital trains nurses and offers quality services to its patients. The health facility provides inpatient and outpatient services, antenatal and postnatal services, ultrasound, comprehensive emergency obstetric care, caesarean section operations, and occupational therapy. The above well-established hospitals also offer laboratory services and advanced technology medical services, which include; Computerized Tomography (CT) scans and radiology. They also dispense drugs and offer Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) services to HIV and AIDS patients, diagnose, and offer free testing for diabetes and hypertension. Physiotherapy orthopaedics and surgery services are provided in most mission hospitals, but they refer complicated cases to Kenyatta National Hospital in Nairobi (Gituma, 2012).

The mission hospitals employ over 1000 workers and offer opportunities to several local vendors who sell their wares to patients and visitors who seek services in these hospitals. Apart from receiving guidance and counselling services from the Roman Catholic Church chaplains in various hospitals, the enterprising residents who live close to these hospitals supply milk and cereals to these facilities. These enable them to earn a steady income readily.

The hospitals do not only offer training in diverse medical care, but they also invite professionals who regularly address public gatherings where they educate them on good nutrition, a balanced diet, hypertension, eyesight challenges, diabetes, and cancer screening. The mission hospitals also organize medical camps and offer free medical services to marginalized communities. These subsidized programs play a key role in counteracting some chronic maladies apart from preaching the gospel (Gituma, 2012).

The clergy and trained health professional workers employed in the catholic mission hospitals and dispensaries in the diocese of Meru are also actively involved in educational, economic, health, and social empowerment activities. This makes them uphold appropriate decisions, act harmoniously, and foster peaceful co-existence among the local inhabitants (Hermann, 2012; Sari, 2013). The clergy further provides guidance and counselling services through seminars which are organized during school holidays. They address various topical issues to the students. In most parishes, various experts are invited to address the congregation after the Sunday mass in diverse fields and offer motivational talks which focus on topical issues such as financial management. The objective is to instil holistic values of education in the congregation and society at large.

The Roman Catholic Church in Meru County also addresses the members' physical health care by encouraging the faithful to register with the National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF) so as to benefit from good and affordable health care. The populace is further taught about the role of good nutrition, which has improved their lifestyle. This is facilitated through organized open-air meetings-*barazas* where local leaders invite social workers and health professionals to address various pertinent issues related to education, health care, societal values, and positive management of the economy. They also organize free medical camps, diagnose, and treat the less fortunate in society who may not afford to visit and pay for medical services in the established hospitals (Heigh & Botta, 2019).

Medical camps are also organized by various church parishes that invite and sponsor visiting medical practitioners and professional counsellors who

reach out to the community. They provide free health care services to the populace, who further reciprocate by joining the Roman Catholic Church. The professional counsellors also address various ailments and social and moral issues such as irresponsible sexual behaviour, drug and substance abuse, and alcohol addiction, among others. These transformation approaches lead to positive changes in people's behaviour.

Apart from education and health care services, there also exist school outreach programs through catechism, which play a vital role in behaviour change. It targets and inculcates positive behaviour among the learners in various privately run Roman Catholic Church schools and in public sponsored schools. The clergy interacts with learners and further changes their attitudes and behaviour positively. This is further enhanced through the publication of Parish journals, which are periodically printed and sold at affordable prices to the congregations.

CONCLUSION

This article has established that the work of missionaries in Africa was synonymous with early mission schools, which later contributed to the development and establishment of education in Africa (Baur, 1994). In the beginning, all countries set up and developed education for industrial or social requirements (Baur, 1994). The early encounter of the Ameru with Christian missionaries reveals that the Consolata Catholic Missionaries have surpassed their protestant counterparts, not only in the field of education but also in medical care (Gituma, 2012). The religious, health, and educational institutions are coordinated and managed by the Bishop. He is assisted in a hierarchical order by the diocesan education and health advisory boards. These two bodies determine the quality of education and health care services and the integration of Christian values within the established educational and health institutions. These advisory boards work closely with the established sub-committees in both fields. They deal with staffing, planning and development projects as well as quality assurance and standards. It is noted that since the attainment of political independence in 1963, the Kenyan government has affected various policy frameworks on education,

social, and economic development. This is evident in the provision of free basic education and the construction of more public schools across the country. The Roman Catholic Church is indeed a key stakeholder that has played a significant role in the education and health sectors of the people in Meru County. It has constructed several schools, middle-level colleges, mission-run hospitals, and dispensaries. These efforts complement the provision of quality education and affordable healthcare to the inhabitants of Meru County.

Additional Information

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