

Christian Women Converting to Islam in Kendu Bay, Kenya: Implications for Witness

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Abstract

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. This growth, however, poses challenges to the Christian mission. It has affected socio-cultural, economic, political and religious dimensions of life. In Africa, and Kenya in particular, the spread of Islam has affected the lives of people at an alarming rate. While the majority of those converting to Islam have been men, in the recent past, Christian women converting or considering joining Islam have been on the increase. This conversion is due to several reasons including religious and economic conveniences. Research in places such as Kendu Bay in Kenya has shown that the majority of Christian widows have converted to Islam at the point of their husband's demise. This conversion has always brought conflicts between Christians and Muslims in the area. Both religious groups have thus looked at each other with suspicion. In most cases, relationships between Christians and Muslims have been disrupted not only at church but also at the family and societal levels. Furthermore, the place of women and their contributions in those three levels has not been given the attention it deserves. In this paper therefore, the researcher examines factors that contribute to women converting to Islam. He proposes ways and solutions that the Church can use so as to remain true and relevant to its missional obligation of spreading the gospel. Data was collected through interviews and participant observation from about fifty Muslim and non-Muslim women; married, singles and widows. A majority of the women who became Muslims converted because of the economic and social support that Islam offers. There are also many traditional practices that Islam identifies with. Unlike Christianity, Islam therefore resonates well with African traditional practices.

Key Words: Islam, Women, Widows, Christianity, Conversion, Traditions, Kendu Bay

Introduction

Islam is a religion that started in Mecca in Saudi Arabia under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad. Within about one hundred years following the death of its founder in 632 A.D, Islam had spread to other parts of Asia, Europe, America and Africa. Today this religion is said to be the fastest growing religion in the world with about 1.6 billion followers. This is second to Christianity that has approximately 2.2 billion adherents (Ashkar, 2017, p. 94). In Africa, particularly at the Kenyan Coast, Arab Muslims interacted with the natives mainly through trade and commerce (Trimingham, 1986, p. 38).

This contact at the Coast did not just end here but rather spread in the interior parts of Kenya to places like Mumias and Kendu Bay in the early part of the twentieth century (Ahmed, 1995, p. 20). Apart from Mombasa, which is the Coastal region of Kenya, both Mumias and Kendu Bay have a considerable number of Muslims residing there. They are both located in the Western part of Kenya. It could have been exciting to explore conversion experiences of Christian women to Islam in those two contexts but due to limited time and space, the researcher focused his study in Kendu Bay. Other references have, however, been drawn from different places in contrasting and comparing this issue of conversion in the region.

The researcher's interest in this Luo community in Kendu Bay is informed by two things. First, being an insider, he has witnessed many cultural and traditional practices being carried out such as funerals, weddings, unveiling of the cross and child naming. Amazingly, most of these rituals usually follow traditional patterns even if Christians are the ones doing them. One can only wonder why Christianity is making little impact in these areas of socio-cultural lives of the people. But another area that informs the researcher's interest lies in the fact that he did his doctoral research among the Luo Muslims living in Kendu Bay. During the interviews, he was dismayed to see many women, mostly widows, acknowledging that they had left the Church and joined Islam. He was not very keen to investigate further since this was not his area of interest at the time. However, cases of Christian women joining Islam in Kendu Bay and other places have been common over the years. This elicits an inquiry into the matters.

In order to fully comprehend how this phenomenon of converting from Christianity to Islam has come about and continued to spread, a brief history about the Luos' present existence suffices. According to Adede, the Luo migration into Kenya came about from three main areas through Uganda: Joka-Jok (presently occupy western Kenya), Joka-Owiny (occupy Alego land) and Joka-Omolo Ochielo. It was this third group that, after coming slightly later in the middle of the sixteenth century or so, migrated into western Kenya spreading into Ugenya, Gem and later to South Nyanza (Adede, 2010, p. 11). This last migration to South Nyanza has also been narrated by Bethwell Ogot in his book, *History of the Luo-Speaking Peoples of Eastern Africa* (2009). It is here that Kendu Bay is situated. Christianity is believed to have been established in the region much earlier than Islam. If this argument is accurate, then it is expected that the majority of the Luo people in this region should have converted into Christianity. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Christian-Muslim Interactions in Kendu Bay

According to Odede, the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church was established in Kendu Bay in 1906. Islam came and was established six years later by the Arab Muslims (Odede, 2010, pp. 10–11). This report is necessary since it gives an idea that Christians and Muslims have lived together and interacted in Kendu Bay for a long time. This co-existence and interaction have had both positive and negative effects on both communities. This is in agreement with what Beyer states as happening whenever Islam has had an influence or co-existed with Christianity:

[S]ince the middle of the twentieth century, Islam has emerged as a serious challenger to this pre-eminent role of Christianity. In countries and regions where Muslims are dominant or at least strongly present, it has in fact become the clearly prevalent model. And even in areas where Muslims are relatively tiny minorities, they spawn movements

which seek to assert ‘the Islamic way’ as the proper way of operating as a religion (Beyer, 2006, p. 119).

Christians and Muslims in Kendu Bay are mainly part of the Luo community in the region. They do many things together including businesses and other community development initiatives. They are mostly divided when it comes to religious issues such as doctrinal beliefs about Christology. In some families there are Christians and Muslims living together. Though divided by religion, their family community identity as Luos usually overrides any other identity. They participate in funerals of their loved ones and other community initiatives under the common identity as Luos and not as a religious entity.

Factors Contributing to Conversion to Islam

Conversion has been defined differently by different people. According to Brendan, conversion is “taken to mean major religious change in terms of a shift from an African religious worldview to Christianity and Islam” (Carmody, 2018, p. 27). Carmody limits conversion to Christianity and Islam. But in reality, the idea of conversion goes beyond this scope. On the other hand, Rambo gives a gradual perspective of conversion rather than a one- time process: “Conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations” (Rambo, 1993, p. 1). There are many factors that have contributed to women converting to Islam.

Islam as a Source of Comfort to Women in Bereavement

Although many people express or react to death differently, women particularly in Africa usually react with a lot of emotions when one of their own demises. This is equally implied by Palgi and Abramovitch:

Death is associated with emotionality, and it is women who express bereavement through crying and self- mutilation. Several theories have been advanced to explain the factors that underlie the sex difference in emotional expression— specifically, that crying may represent a female form of aggression; that women, through their roles as nurturing, sympathetic mothers and wives, develop stronger attachments to the deceased; or that women may simply be used as the persons who symbolize publicly the loss that all have experienced (Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984, p. 388).

Just like in Kendu Bay, women in many places in Africa who have been bereaved by their husbands usually find themselves so lonely with very little support from the family of the late husband and sometimes from the Christian community or the Church that the widow and her family used to attend. It is during this hour of need that Muslims come in to support the widow. The narrative that these Muslims force conversion no longer holds. Conversion in this case is simply induced by their physical presence and providing food items right from the start of the funeral up to the end. This is usually not the case with most of the Christians. They might show up in the beginning but leave early for other Church meetings. The Muslims console the widow and even go as far as offering educational and material support to herself and her

children. All these turn up to be attractive and the widow and her children are slowly persuaded to join Islam.

Marriage Factor

Islam first came to East Africa through the Kenyan Coastal region. The main activity between Arab Muslims and African natives at the Coast was commerce (Trimingham, 1964, p. 38). Trade and commerce did not end at the Coast but spread to other interior parts of Kenya including Mumias and Kendu Bay. But besides trade, the Arab Muslims started to intermarry with the local people. In my book, “African Traditions Meeting Islam: A Case of Luo Muslim Funerals in Kendu Bay, Kenya” (Oseje, 2019, p. 57), I have narrated how Arab Muslims made inroads to Kendu Bay through trade but eventually ended up marrying the local Luo women. According to the Muslim faith, any women married to a Muslim including the offspring in that marriage automatically become Muslims.

This marriage factor includes the permission granted by Islam for a widow (widowhood state is referred to as *nika* in Arabic) to re-marry whoever she wants after the death of her husband. This means that the husband she chooses to be married to will have to pay a fresh dowry to her. Many Christian widows feel attracted to this kind of arrangement since in many Christian settings, there seems to be no proper guidance or direction to the widows even though the Bible has a lot to say about it. Some widows who have converted to Islam justified their conversion to this neglect. Some Churches are even reported to collude with families in championing the traditional path of forcing these widows to marry whoever these family members and relatives decide. This is usually against the wishes of these widows.

Unlike Christianity, Islam allows for polygamy: “Multiple marriages are acceptable among Muslims; more specifically, polygyny (multiple wives) is acceptable, since only men are permitted multiple marriage partners. Men are permitted up to four wives if they treat each equally” (Robinson, 2014, p. 134). The interesting thing is that Islam requires men to provide for their multiple wives whom they have married. In this current world where means of livelihood has become extremely difficult to many people, the idea of many women being married to a husband is certainly quite enticing. Due to this economic challenge, some Christian women have ended up getting married to Muslim men.

Perception and Disinterest in Christianity

Christianity came much earlier than Islam in many African societies. However, Islam spread faster and within a very short time gained acceptance due to negative perception of Western missionaries about African traditional practices. These negativisms were numerous. First, African practices are viewed as unbiblical. It is claimed that the Bible teaches that behind genuinely extraordinary supernatural powers of African traditional religion is the work of demonic spirits (Gehman, 2011, p. 118). Second, is the issue of ethnocentrism. African traditional religion is viewed to promote division along ethnic and tribal line. Third, is the negative and derogatory view of African cultures. Some missionaries equated Western cultures with God, while African religions and cultures were equated with Satan. The African worldview and religions were seen as being primitive (Mumo, 2018, p. 41).

Fourth, not only did the African traditions viewed derogatively but also viewed as inferior and demonic. For instance, According to Nwafor: “Christian missionaries of the West saw most of what Africans treasured and valued in their culture as devilish and demons to be cast out” (Nwafor, 2016, p. 1). Fifth, African traditions are perceived to be unstable and temporal—Portuguese missionaries who came in 15th century and were warmly received felt that these Africans would give up their culture and beliefs. Since this was not the case they became hostile and resorted to slave trade (Lugira, 2009, p. 24) . Sixth, Christianity seems to have generalized African traditional practices. Due to Western missionary influence, “the first group [western-influenced Christianity] regarded all forms of African practices and rituals as ‘ancestral worship’; consequently, members were forbidden to participate in any of the rituals” (Mills, n.d., p.1).

Seventh, African traditions are considered pagan and uncivilized. Missionaries viewed African people as “pagans” and “objects” of missions, and missionaries were “good Samaritans” bringing the civilizing influence of Christianity to Africa (Clark, 2005, p. 143). The word ‘pagan’ is derived from the Latin word *paganus* which means “village dweller”(Omogbe, 1993, p. 23). No sense of religion and no sense of sin—Hence incorrigible (not able to change) savages or beasts (Maimela, 1985, p. 65). Eighth, African traditional religion was viewed by the Western missionaries to have evil rituals. Anderson and Pillay state: “Missionaries perceived most African rituals and practices as evil and referred to African people as ‘worshippers of demons’ or worshippers of ancestors” (Anderson & Pillay, 1997, p. 228) . Ninth, there is a claim that it is Christianity and not African traditional religion that gives new identity. According to Anderson and Pillay, ”The so called Christian names in the form of Biblical names like John, Joseph and Timothy were a symbol of new identity” (Anderson & Pillay, 1997, p. 229).

Tenth, African traditions are viewed as polytheistic and secretive. “Due to the fact that they had a very strong connection with ancestors and performed a number of rituals related to them. It also not possible to know what was going on and no access to the ritual meetings” (Ntombana, 2015, p. 109). Eleventh, there is a wide claim that African traditional religion is a false religion—The intent of the missionaries was to bring Christianity to a continent they believed to have no true religion. They meant to stamp out African religious practices they saw as superstition and ignorance (Lugira, 2009, p. 24). Twelfth, the God of African traditional religion is viewed to be different from the Christian God. “The fact that African people may have worshipped the same Supreme Being does not mean that the God whom African people have worshipped can be simply identified with the God and Father of Jesus Christ” (Ijeoma, n.d., p. 175). Finally, African tradition are perceived to be having exaggerated emotions as Lugira confides: “Too much shaking, dance and manifestations of Spiritism through communal with the ancestral spirits” (Lugira, 2009, p. 22).

Even though the Western missionaries are no longer actively involved in the affairs and operations of the native African Churches as they used to in colonial and early days of the spread of Christianity, these negative perceptions about African traditional practices have been inherited by some of the current Church leadership. These Christian leaders are mainly those who have been brought up in the Western missionary traditions. These negative perceptions about African traditions are very limited in Islam. A majority of African women are the ones mostly affected by these traditions. They therefore find it uninteresting and not so comforting to

remain in Church. This therefore explains why a majority of them have found themselves in Islam.

Division in Christianity and Social Support

Islam has taken an advantage of division that seems to be apparent in Christianity. This is not something new since right from the early history, the division between the Western and Eastern Church based on theological issues around divinity and humanity of Christ was evidenced. It was due to this division that gave rise to the wide spread of Islam. In 16th century of the middle period of Christianity, the Church was so exhausted due to its infighting about these theological issues centering on Christology that it had no more strength to fight Islam that was widely spreading at the time. According to Chia and Fitzgerald, “There are hundreds, if not thousands, of different Christian denominations in the world today. There are so many churches that some people wish that Christianity would return to being the one single united church inspired by Jesus Christ” (Chia & Fitzgerald, 2018, p. 97).

While there is nothing wrong with having many Christian denominations, the infighting has become apparent within these denominations and one Church against the other, have obviously made some people in Kenya, especially women, to join Islam. In the view of some women, Islam seems to be peaceful and very religious. Since most of these women are not looking for Church positions but simply for a place, they can be accommodated and having their material and psychological needs met, they have found Islam to be such a place. Islam also has a number of NGOs such as orphanages, HIV support centers and groups, table banking where women in their groups are given money to operate their small-scale businesses. All these have proved to be a source of attraction to Christian women.

Catholicism in Islam and Traditional Conservatism

One of the strategies that has worked well in the advancement of Islam in Kenya and other regions of the world is its openness to accommodate African traditions. This is what Sanneh implies: “It [Islam] demands no major radical adjustments and that it is easily incorporated into the rhythm of African life” (Sanneh, 1997, p. 7). Christianity on the other hand, has more often than not demanded strict following of Christian beliefs and practices that are in conformity with the word of God.

Catholicism in Islam has meant that anybody can join this religion but at the same time continue practicing his or her traditional beliefs and rituals. Thomas gives a perspective that explains why many people, albeit Christians or Muslims, are still deeply rooted to their traditional beliefs and practices: “Traditional African religion continues to survive at the cultural subconscious center of most Africans, regardless of their allegiance to Islam or Christianity” (Thomas, 2015, p. 6). This sentiment by Thomas means that in the case of Christian women, they have the option to join Islam due to the freedom Islam accords them to continue practicing their old traditions or decide to remain in Church but still give their allegiance to their old traditions. This catholic and tolerant nature of African traditional religions as Lewis explains, “presents another face of Muslim universalism” (Lewis, 1980, p. 60). Madid compares universalism in Christianity and Islam: “Christianity’s universalizing ethos was seen as a threat to the indigenous culture whereas Islam, while itself universalizing, was viewed as strengthening the

traditional and indigenous culture” (Madidi, 2003, p. 46). Madidi’s remark helps to explain why in many places where both Christianity and Islam co-exist, the majority of the indigenous people prefer Islam to Christianity.

The idea of traditional conservatism, particularly among the Luo people, can also be understood by looking at the meaning that is attached to the term ‘Luo’ as Ongong’a puts it: “the name ‘Lwo’, (from which the word Luo emanates) was derived from the fact that the members of this group of Nilotes were constantly following one another in groups in search of better pasturage” (Ongong’a, 1983, p. 7). One of the ways of how Luo people, including women, found themselves in Islam especially in Kendu Bay was as a result of following in the footsteps of others. This is particularly true by looking at the history of how Islam came to Kendu Bay. It got spread through a person who went to work in Mumias. He was attracted to the Muslim lifestyle and also got to see many similarities between Islamic practices and Luo traditions. This person came back to his home in Kendu Bay with a completely different lifestyle from what his fellow Luo community previously knew about him. This changed lifestyle and the fact that one of their own people have spoken well of Islam made quite a number of Luo people to join it. Women were the majority to join in following in the footsteps of their husbands. This is part of cultural conformity in Luo community that requires that a wife follows what her husband does.

Theological and Religious Factors

Theological factor focuses on the teachings in Islam that are based on the Qur’an and Muslim traditions about the place of women and how they are perceived. Looking at the theological factor is important and in line with what Mahdi posits: “Islamic teachings shape the everyday lives of Muslims around the globe” (2016, p. 81). Several Qur’anic passages have a lot to say about the treatment of women that are quite positive and point to the reason Christian women convert to Islam. In Q 4:19: “O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will; and you should not treat them with harshness.” Going by this scripture, men are admonished to seek consent from the women they intend to inherit and not treat them with cruelty. This is obviously a positive thing and one that many women especially the widows would be attracted to. Traditionally in the Luo community, when a husband died, his wife was left vulnerable and more often than not, forced to be inherited by a relative from her husband’s side.

If Sura 4: 4 one reads: “And give to the women (whom you marry) their *Mahr* (obligatory bridal-money).” This is something that many Christian women would go for since most cultures in Africa including Luos demand that the dowry is paid to the *wazee* (tribal leaders in the community) as a compensation or as a sign of respect to the parents and the elders of the clan for taking good care of their daughter. Women given to marriage hardly receive any portion of this dowry. This dowry given to a woman in marriage becomes a source of security for her as Haddad and Esposito explain: “Islam also gave women financial security since they received a dowry from their husbands at the time of marriage”(Haddad & Esposito, 2001, p. 109) . She is then free to spend it as she deems fit. This provides some sort of independence even though Islam requires that a husband provide for his family.

This economic independence is what Nasr identifies: “It is important to note for the Islamic understanding of womanhood and women’s roles in both religious and social life that, in

contrast to the biblical story, Eve did not tempt Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. Rather, they were tempted together by Iblis and therefore Eve was not the cause of Adam's expulsion from paradise" (Nasr, 2002, p. 14). So the dominant idea by some Christians, especially men, that it was Eve who deceived Adam, seems not to be the case in Islam. Both are viewed to have been the victims of Satan. This view is quite convincing to Christian women who in most cases feel accused unjustly even for the things they believe they have not played any role.

Christianity, especially in Western societies, is believed to have been "used to promote racism and sexism, while Islam, they argue, balances the rights and responsibility of men and women with the need for community cohesion and social justice" (Rouse, 2004, p. 40). According to Rouse, Christianity has been on one extreme while Islam tends to balance the roles and responsibilities of both men and women. Christianity is often associated with Westernization or secularization. These ideologies are believed to have distorted the image of Christianity hence a desire by many women to seek an alternative religious outfit in Islam. There is also a cultural freedom that Islam instills among women, especially widows. This is captured by Oseje in his research among the Luo Muslims in Kendu Bay:

Besides the effect that this concept of cleanliness has brought, there is also a new understanding of widowhood. This is most relevantly in the sense that a Luo-Muslim widow is expected to wed (*nika*) her new husband. The effect of this is that promiscuity and ridicule have been minimized. A widow who fails to wed and instead elopes with a man is treated as a prostitute, such that she loses the benefit of enjoying her identity as a Muslim. She is also viewed as an outcast. Facing such treatment and ridicule is usually too shameful not only to the individual but also to the Luo-Muslim society as a whole. The fear of being isolated makes the widow and other persons in the Luo-Muslim community follow Islamic teachings about good morals (2019, pp. 186–187)

The idea of wedding gives a Luo Muslim a sense that they are committed to their religious obligations. The reason why *nika* is encouraged is to preserve the morality of the Luo-Muslim community. It is also done with the view of meeting the material needs of the widow and her children (Oseje, 2019, p. 334).

Effects of Christian Women Converting to Islam

As it has been emphasized in this paper, many Christian women in Kendu Bay and other parts of Africa have joined Islam especially at the point of the demise of their husbands. The effects this conversion has brought about are both positive and negative, not only to these women, but also to Christian and Muslim faith. Within the context of Kendu Bay, many of these women, including widows who have converted to Islam, explain that they have found a home away from home. They are frequently visited by Muslim clerics and their children are educated in primary schools and other institutions of higher learning.

Kendu Bay being a home for Christianity and Islam, conversion of these Christian women has been a bone of contention between these two faiths. A majority of Christian pastors whose members have joined Islam have been accusing Muslims of using witchcraft to lure their members to Islam. But on the other hand, Muslims have been counteracting this and justifying their course of action by rebuking Christians for not practicing what they believe or teach. These

two faiths sometimes hold parallel meetings and counter accusing each other. But while these seem to be negative, Christians and Muslims have continued to stand together as a community whenever one of their loved ones dies. In a funeral situation, they often forget their religious differences and bury the deceased as a community member. Community identity therefore takes precedent.

Due to economic empowerment from Muslim NGOs to these women converts, most of them have started small income-generating businesses that have enabled them to take care of their children and meet their other felt needs. Many of these Muslim women in Kendu Bay are involved in table banking, in which they borrow money without paying interest and in order to inject some capital into their businesses. The profits they make are for them to live on.

The Muslim community in the area has been aggressive in encouraging their members to fully support these vulnerable women. They not only preach and teach their members how to be hospitable to each other but also reach out even to non-Muslims with foodstuffs and other valuable resources. Because of economic challenges and the fact that Islam teaches and requires men to be responsible and provide for their families, many women have taken advantage of this and have now joined Islam. Life seems to be easy for them unlike their Christian friends who still struggle to provide for themselves and their families.

This exodus of Christian women to Islam has left many churches with few members with very minimal ministry involvements since women usually are the most active people in churches. Church leaders have learned this lesson and are now working hard to provide women in their churches with capital to start small scale businesses. These Christian leaders have also begun to look at theological and biblical discourses touching on widows and how best to help them. Teachings on moral values are also gaining momentum.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that many Christian women have converted to Islam. The researcher has pointed out several reasons why this conversion has been possible. These include social and economic empowerment. The church needs to take an active role in training women and empowering them with skills that can enable them to start and operate small scale businesses for their sustenance. Such initiatives as face-to-face prayer and sharing the Bible as Adeney proposes remain extremely powerful bridges, particularly Bible stories of women and even more the stories of Jesus (Adeney, 2018, p. 115) which will go a long way in achieving a stable foundation for women in church and society. Church leaders and Muslim clerics need to educate their members on the need to co-exist and work together toward promoting unity and harmony in the community. Christian-Muslim dialogue on matters of common interest should also be encouraged. Appreciation of diversity, forgiveness and reconciliation should be advanced by all stakeholders in religious, public and corporate life.

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