

Tracing the Feminine Participation in the Religio-Political Affairs in Kenya Upto 2010

Rev. Dr. Manya Wandefu Stephen
Alupe University, Kenya

Since the onset of the constitution 2010, the Kenyan community has put more weight on women empowerment. The emphasis is more on the girl child compared to the boy child. There are several steps that have been taken to uplift the status of the girl child; these include the creation of a special position in parliament just to deal with women matters. Apart from these there has been deliberate efforts put in place to bring women at par with their male counterparts by putting in place the one third gender. These efforts though laudable requires political good will. However, there is emerging a new phenomenon that seems to pose a challenge to these political-constitutional efforts. This is, the perception of religion and the equation of human equality. In this paper, I try to trace the female participation in the religious and political engagements in Kenya upto 2010.

Keywords: religio-political, feminine, villagisation, gender-mainstreaming, socio-cultural

Introduction

This paper deals with the role of women in religious and political affairs in Kenya. The interaction is between religion and politics and how this has had a bearing on the women of this country. Let's remember that, the purpose of religion as a socio-cultural system is to provide for the need to explain inexplicable and strange events in society, and it uses the supernatural to do so (Hambrock, 1981, p. 111). In Africa, leadership is perceived as having its roots in the divine and as such politics becomes a divine ordered exercise. Religion thus defines itself as the root of all in all for Africa.

African Traditional Religion

African religion can be conceptualised in five parts: beliefs, practices of various ritualised ceremonies and festivals, religious objectives, values and morals, and the religious officials and leaders. Beliefs form an essential part of religion and portray the way people perceive the universe pertaining to topics such as God, spirits, human life, and magic. Beliefs help people explain phenomena such as lightning, disease, and death that affect their daily lives (Mbiti, 1994, pp. 11-12). In non-specialised societies people believe that the spirit of man survives after death and has power to influence the living and their circumstances. Hence, the spirits of the dead are feared, respected, or venerated by most African people (Hambrock, 1981, p. 113).

Africans participate in many ceremonies and rituals. During these festivals, people sing, dance, and celebrate a memorable event to mark, for instance, a successful harvest or childbirth (Mbiti, 1994, p. 11). Prayer is a ritual

that is often performed to obtain the intervention of a supernatural being. Rituals are often accompanied by offerings in form of food or material objects. Such rituals are performed at places such as shrines, groves, sacred hills or mountains or by a sacrifice involving the killing of animals as a tribute to the supernatural (Hambrock, 1981, pp. 125-126)

Amulets, masks, ritual drums, and sacred stools are used for the coronation of a new chief. Numbers may also have importance in these rituals. For example, number seven is considered unfortunate in parts of Kenya, while some people in this country consider number seven to be sacred and indicating perfection (Mbiti, 1994, pp. 145-146).

Religious leaders conduct religious ceremonies, sacrifices, formal prayers and divination. They may be men or women who have religious knowledge, lead others in religious activities, and serve as a link between people on the one hand, and God and spirits, on the other. Such leaders embody the presence of God among the people, their beliefs as well as their moral values. They include medicine men, diviners, mediums, seers, priests, ritual leaders, rain makers and rulers (Mbiti, 1994, pp. 12, 153).

Women and Ritualization

In male-dominated societies, women were often excluded from political and religious positions of authority and so spirit possession compensated for their generally low status (Lewis, 1971, p. 79). Some women participated in ritual fertility activities as mediums and by uttering words that alleviated their misfortunes, they were psychologically helped to cope with stress (Strobel, 1984, pp. 89-90).

Brettel and Sergent's (2001) discussion of sex and death in funeral rites gives an interesting view of women's (particularly Giriama women's) participation in religious rituals in Kenya. Giriama women participate in the *Kidufu* fertility dance at the beginning of every new moon, using sacred *kidufu* clay pots that are named after their deceased who were former custodians of their clan. It is believed that these *kidufu* pots have power to destroy the women's reproductive health if they fail to supplicate to them at every new moon. These *kidufu* pots are removed from their shrines every month in order to be spoken, sung, and danced to, and "played" by blowing air over their openings. The accompanying songs and dances are characterised by "obscene and suggestive movements" which are usually performed by post-menopausal women although at times young pubescent girls also play (Brettel & Sergent, 2001, pp. 412-413).

Political Organisation

Political organisation is a socio-cultural system that regulates the relations between members of a society and between different societies. Amongst other matters, political organisation embraces political communities of varying sizes based on principles such as kinship, seniority, locality, property ownership and authority. Anthropologists distinguish between centralised and non-centralised systems of political authority. In non-centralised systems of government, political order is embedded in kinship relations, ritual practices, and age systems (Vorster, 1981, p. 79).

In centralised systems political authority is concentrated in the ruling group headed by a chief, king, or head of government as a legislative, judicial, and executive head. The head has extensive powers which are derived from and held in check by the constitution. The ruler's position is sometimes hereditary, based on either patrilineal descent or female succession. Such rulers are powerful: They order national ceremonies, head the army, convene national assemblies, and rule in accordance with the constitution (Vorster, 1981, pp. 80-81).

Traditional African Political Organisation and the Position of Women

The pre-colonial hunting and gathering societies of Central and Southern Africa were characterised by political equity between men and women. Women organised the hunting of small animals, gathered roots and berries, fetched water and cared for small children. Men were involved in hunting larger animals and the division and storage of the kill. Both participated in the ritual and communal activities of their societies. Women had political control over farming, trading, household and family affairs (Rosaldo & Lamphole, 1976, p. 20).

African women formed solidarity groups based on age, culture, or economic production tasks, which provided them with formal relationships, endowed with a psychological sense of self-esteem. They were bound to each other through a complex set of associations and a sense of belonging provided a base from which they carried on their daily affairs. Among the Mende and Sherbo of Sierra Leone, women held chieftainships on the same basis as men, their gender being seen as irrelevant to their political role (Hay & Stichter, 1984, pp. 143-144).

The colonial powers did not realise that female leaders existed in African societies. A good example cited by Hay and Stichter (1984, p. 144) is that of the Igbo, where the British made a male Obi a salaried official but by passed his female counterpart, the Omu, thus destroying the “dual sex” political system. Women were viewed as helpmates to men, and were regarded as being outside the proper realm of politics because the colonial officers conceptualised the role of women in politics as secondary. Women from Mauritania to Mali, Guinea, Zaire, and Zambia engaged in militant protest actions in the late 1980s which played an important role in the political liberation of these countries (Tripp, 1996, p. 285).

Traditional Political Systems in Kenya

This section examines political systems of two of the 42 tribes of Kenya, namely the Luyia and the Gikuyu. The Gikuyu were chosen in this study because they are the majority tribe in Kenya. While the Abaluyia were chosen because of their history, they had a kingdom ruled by a paramount King—Nabongo Mumia who ruled the Kingdom for 67 years from 1882 to 1949 according to Kenyanchui (1992, p. 4). Were (1967, pp. 29-30) points out that the Abaluyia are not homogenous. They consist of 18 major sub-ethnic groups who have diverse historical roots, which led to numerous variations in their dialects, customs, and practices. In spite of their diverse origins, they speak mutually intelligible Luyia dialects and share many cultural characteristics. When the Abaluyia settled in Western Kenya, they came into contact with various groups such as the Iteso, Kalenjin, and Maasai, with whom they intermarried and from whom they borrowed various goods and words (Bukachi, 2007, p. 7).

The Luyia political system is based on the ideas of Nabongo Mumia who was the last important ruler of the Wanga Kingdom in Buluyia, in the Western Province of Kenya. The Wanga is one of the 18 Luyia sub-tribes and clans played a leading role in the formulation of states. The *Abashitsetse* clan was founded by Wanga in the 17th century (Kenyanchui, 1992, p. 7). Kingship was based on the principle of inheritance. To many Kenyans the Wanga Kingdom is dead, remembered only in history books with tales of Nabongo Mumia, the legendary ruler (Kisia, 2010, p. 11). The Wanga today have a ceremonial Monarch, His Highness Prince Peter Mumia the second and Queen Lilian Mumia. The prince and queen perform and preside over traditional ceremonies such as weddings and funerals with the help of a council of elders. But the kingdom its titles and organs are largely non-existent. Prince Peter Mumia the second was coroneted on 10 April 2010 and became the 14th king of the Wanga Kingdom. The ceremony was witnessed by traditional elders from Kenyan tribes and from other African countries such as Libya and Uganda (Shilitsa & Wanzala, 2010, p. 11).

The central people of Kenya include the Kikuyu, Embu, Mbeere, Kamba, Meru, and Tharaka, who are also referred to as the “Mount Kenya” people. They live in five administrative counties, namely Kiambu, Murang’a, Nyeri, Meru, and Embu (Kenyatta, 1965, p. xv).

Wanyoike (2002, p. 21) states that among the Gikuyu, the home was the fundamental basis of the social structure and interaction. Each family *nyumba* was the basic political and administrative unit under the headship of the father, who owned the family property and made all major decisions affecting the family. In case of the father’s absence or death, his duties were performed by his eldest son in consultation with his brothers and other close relatives (Muriuki, 1974, p. 115). The settling of quarrels and regulations of local affairs were carried out on a kinship or village basis. Clan or kinship solidarity was important; the village became the focus of social and political interaction that cemented local relationships. After initiation, young men became junior warriors and after a lengthy apprenticeship, they were admitted to the ranks of senior warriors. When these men came of age, they were promoted to the position of elders and entrusted with judicial and legislative powers (Kenyatta, 1965, pp. 190-193).

Muriuki (1974, p. 132) points out that *athamaki* were spokesmen and distinguished leaders of the warriors who held considerable power among the Gikuyu. The *Muthamaki* was a chairman of the local unit which composed of his age-mates and was to have qualities of wisdom, tact, self-control, and wide experience in leadership. The *Muthamaki*’s powers were circumscribed and he could only act in accordance with wishes of his peers, who delegated powers to him (Wanyoike, 2002, p. 22).

Among the Gikuyu, males who qualified to be warriors had a primary duty to defend the land against internal and external enemies and were entrusted with executive powers by the council of elders, to carry out government operations on behalf of the whole community. Self-assertion, courage, self-confidence, and diligence were the important assets for a warrior. This allowed them to proceed to the position of senior adulthood where they exercised mainly religious and judicial functions. The Gikuyu society was generally patriarchal, un-centralized, and egalitarian. Hence, the social and political organization fell into the category of cephalous societies in which authority and power was widely diffused through their varied components. At times, it was impossible to pinpoint the locus of political power (Muriuki, 1974, p. 13).

Unlike their male counterparts, Gikuyu girls were not organized into regiments but were divided into junior and senior girls, corresponding with junior and senior warriors with whom they associated. Junior girls had to pay a fee in order to be admitted to the ranks of the senior girls who instructed them on how to perform women’s tasks such as looking after children. The senior girls also provided sex education to ensure proper behavior between girls and warriors (Muriuki, 1974, pp. 121-122).

Kenyan Women in Colonial Politics 1885-1962

Kenya’s colonial political system came into being with the establishment of the British colonial system. The European era began with the Berlin Conference of 1885, when European powers first partitioned East Africa into spheres of influence, which marked the official opening of the “scramble” for Africa and the formal launch of Kenya’s colonial experience. In 1895, the British government established the East African Protectorate and, soon after, opened the fertile highlands to white settlers. The settlers were allowed a voice in government even before Kenya was officially made a British colony in 1920, but Africans were prohibited from direct political participation until 1944.

There were notable individuals and groups of Kenyan women who played key political roles during the colonial times. Among these was a Gikuyu woman, Wangu wa Makeri who was appointed “Chief” of Weithaga Location in Murang’a District by the British in 1902. Wangu was married to a wealthy man, Makeri wa Mbogo with whom she had six children. Wangu’s motherhood bestowed on her a new status that earned her the respect of the entire community and gained her entry into the Kange’i age group. Wangu was the spokeswoman during traditional marriage ceremonies in the community. She was also generous and used her wealth and diplomacy to care for orphans, the poor, and the rich visitors to her homestead. Among the dignitaries who visited her home was Karuri wa Gakure who was her mentor and the paramount chief of Fort Hall (now Murang’a) County (Wanyoike, 2002, pp. 28-29).

Wanyoike (2002, pp. 35-40) points out that Wangu wa Makeri sat on the council of elders which was preserved for men. She also embraced western education, and interacted and collaborated with missionaries and government administrators in the preservation of law and order, by controlling beer drinking, tax collection, maintenance of minor roads, water supplies, and health measures. She also set up demonstration farms where her communities were taught new agricultural and veterinary methods. She was a tough androgynous chief whose leadership was marked by assertiveness, decisiveness, and firmness and she even acquired a reputation of being arrogant and tyrant and that she mistreated men. Missionaries were given unequivocal support by Wangu throughout her tenure of office as a “Chief” to establish Mission Stations and formal schools in present day Murang’a and Kirinyaga Districts. Products of such schools were role models to the community and were employed as teachers, medical attendants, and clerks by the colonial administrators (Wai, 1994, pp. 6-7, 23).

Wanyoike (2002, pp. 43-45) points out that the appointment of Wangu as “Chief” among the Gikuyu who were a patriarchal society was an anomaly that was unacceptable to some Gikuyu men. These men became jealous of her raised status and plotted for her downfall. She was also unpopular among some people in Weithaga because she enforced colonial laws which symbolised colonial oppression, loss of independence, and gradual erosion of the traditional system. Wangu’s downfall finally came in 1909 when she joined Karuri (her mentor and paramount chief of Murang’a) in a *kibaata* dance that was meant for young unmarried men. Her participation in this dance was seen by the community as being tantamount to usurpation of manhood. During the dance some of Wangu’s clothes fell off accidentally and exposed her breasts and thighs. Wanyoike (2002, pp. 47-52) states that Wangu’s detractors accused her of having “danced the *kibaata* naked” which they claimed was embarrassing to men, women, and children and had impacted negatively on her image as their community leader. These exaggerated accusations culminated in Wangu’s character assassination and her eventual resignation from being a “headman” in June 1909. Wangu was brave, diligent, courageous, and radical; such leadership qualities enabled her to demonstrate that women could lead society the same way that men did if they were given the opportunity.

Cieune of Embu District was another woman “Chief” during the colonial period (Wanyoike, 2002, p. 43). She lived between 1870 and 1940 and during her reign she displayed manly qualities such as fighting in tribal wars and attending men’s councils. The men envied her bravery and power and plotted to have her deposed by the District Commissioner (DC). The male “Chiefs” who were jealous of Cieune’s success and popularity as a woman leader tricked her by cheating her into believing that the DC wanted all of them to appear naked before him. The men pretended that they too were going to appear before the DC naked but of course they did not do so. In the end, only Cieune showed up naked and as a result she lost her position.

Mugo (1978, p. 213) states that in 1908 the colonial government forced the Gikuyu women of Kiambu to build roads and to carry timber from the forest. The women protested against forced labour on European farms

in 1921-1922, led by a male freedom fighter, Harry Thuku, who defended their rights and was later arrested. These women protested against Thuku's arrest and demanded his release by exposing themselves (their nakedness was a curse on those who saw them exposed). The British shot their leader, Mary Nyanjiru, with 21 others. Nyanjiru has since been regarded as the mother of female political protest in Kenya (Ogot & Presley, 1993, p. 524).

Presley (1988, p. 504) says that in the 1930s and 1940s, women's wings were created within men's political parties. Major political parties at this time were found in Nairobi and Central Provinces of Kenya because the European had taken over the African land in Central Province and the rift valley. One of the political parties was an underground political movement known in Kiswahili as *Mzungu arudi ulaya mwafrica apate uhuru* (MAUMAU) literally translated as "the Europeans should go back to Britain and the Africans should get the freedom (Independence)". The Kenya African Union (KAU), Kenya African National Union (KANU), and Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) were formed in 1960s. Women used their positions of leadership in these parties to raise funds and to provide facilities for girls' education. Women served in the Mau Mau, political movement, as recruiters, organisers, spies, and soldiers. These women also smuggled arms, food, clothing, and medicine to the guerrilla army which completely transformed their political roles (Ogot & Presley, 1993, p. 524).

The *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization* (MYWO), a non-governmental organisation, was established by the government in 1952 to deal with women's issues and to wean them away from the Mau Mau (Nzomo, 1989, p. 10). The colonial government engaged itself in *villagisation* and propaganda programmes to address the women's unmet needs of education, health care, access to clean and reliable water and child-care in order to diffuse their participation in the Mau Mau rebellion. Many women suffered during the Mau Mau movement by being forced to take the oath of allegiance to the organisation. They were also massacred, imprisoned, and at times described as prostitutes. Women's activism sparked responses from the government. A large number of women were arrested, detained, and interrogated between 1957 and 1960 (Presley, 1988, pp. 504-505, 512, 513).

The first Kenyan woman to be nominated to the Kenyan Legislative Council (LegCo) and to take the oath of office was Jemimah Gecaga a Gikuyu, in 1958. This proved to the rest of the female population that the LegCo was not the preserve of men. Apart from participating in parliamentary debates, Gecaga used women's organisations to promote education, public welfare, and probation services to improve women's status in Kenya. Margaret Kenyatta, a Gikuyu and the daughter of Kenya's first President, Jomo Kenyatta, participated in the formation of the first ruling party, Kenya African National Union (KANU) in 1960. Priscilla Abwao, a Luo, was the second African woman in Kenya to be nominated to the LegCo, in 1961 (Likimani, 1985, pp. 1-2).

The Participation of Women in Kenyan Politics From 1963 to 2010

Priscilla Abwao was the only nominated member of Legislative Council (LegCo) who attended the famous Lancaster House Conference that paved the way for Kenya's independence in 1963. Abwao was a skilful parliamentarian who initiated and promoted many educational and developmental projects for rural and urban women in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania (Likimani, 1991, p. 10). Grace Onyango was the first woman in Kenya to be elected as mayor and then as member of Parliament in 1969 (Likimani, 1991, p. 4).

Kenya gained full independence on 12 December, 1963. The following year the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) was established to co-ordinate women's organisations in Kenya (Nzomo, 1989, p. 10). Professor Wangari Maathai became the chairperson of the NCWK from 1981 to 1987. Through her Green-Belt tree planting movement she encouraged Kenyans, particularly women, to plant trees. The NCWK became

unpopular with the government because it raised national issues that affected women and, demanded changes where women's rights were adversely affected (Nzomo, 1989, p. 11).

The declaration of the United Nations Women's Decade in 1975 encouraged member states such as Kenya to make changes and to introduce policies and programmes geared towards the accelerated advancement of women. Kenya responded by creating the Women's Bureau in 1976 to coordinate all women's programmes in the country. However, the Bureau, a government project, perpetuated women's status in the home and ignored their participation in the political realm. Women were therefore taken as a population category with special needs based on nutrition, the family, and children's welfare (Nzomo, 1989, p. 10). In 1984 the government signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (NFLS) in 1985. Several women from Kenya attended these international forums and were encouraged to participate in politics (Republic of Kenya, 2006, pp. 2-4).

Were (1985, p. 5) initiated the research theme "Women in Development" (WID) and encouraged scholars to investigate the achievements and roles of African women in development, with the objective of identifying constraints that hinder African women's full and effective participation in developmental processes. Experts on women studies in Africa suggested ways of removing such impediments in order for women to achieve faster and effective development in Africa. This was justified by the fact that women accounted for about 50 percent of the continent's human population. The research proposed that, to achieve rapid development for women on the continent, they should, together with men, have access to technology, skills, education, resources, and opportunities.

The 1985 International Nairobi Women's Conference was held to take stock of and close the United Nations decade that had been dedicated to empower women across the world. Kenyan women lacked policies and frameworks that could empower them to achieve equality with men in decision making. The government established the National Commission on Gender and Development in November 2004. The Women's Bureau became the Department of Gender in December 1985. It supported gender mainstreaming and advised on the impact of all government policies on women by developing strategies to eliminate gender discrimination (Republic of Kenya, 2006, pp. 2, 18).

The 1995 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) created more room for women to participate in decision-making by promoting gender equality and empowering women through the establishment of universal primary education. According to *Sessional Paper No. 2 of 2006 on Gender Equality and Development* (Republic of Kenya, 2006, p. 18), women are still under-represented in strategic decision making institutions such as local authorities, trade unions, cooperative societies, professional bodies, and grassroots-based institutions such as Land Boards (also see Clarion, 2001, p. 23).

Women's representation in local councils increased from about three percent in 1992 to eight percent and thirteen in 1997 and 2002, respectively. In the civil service the number of women in key positions has been small compared to that of men. Most women in employment were found at the lower and middle levels of the civil service, with only 10 to 15 percent working at the highest level. At community level, both in pastoral and agricultural communities, women were traditionally not represented in decision making bodies such as village or clan councils of elders where all political and judicial decisions were made. The situation is changing gradually. Women have made inroads in specific forums including Parent-Teachers Associations (PTAs), self-help groups, Women's Community-Based Organisations (WCBOs), and Advisory Boards. The main objective of WCBOs

was to encourage women to participate in various social, cultural, and economic activities. WCBOs also provide opportunities for women to voice their views through their representatives at community and decision-making level. The number of registered women groups increased from 2003-2004 by five thousand (Republic of Kenya, 2006, pp. 18-19).

According to Kweyu (2006, p. 11) and with regard to the central government of Kenya, women have been and still are greatly underrepresented. For example, in 1969, only two percent of the members of the Kenyan Parliament were women. In 1992, during the second multiparty elections, about two percent of the Kenyan women candidates campaigned to join parliament. They won seven seats which was 3.5 percent out of total of 200 seats while the men won 193 seats 96.5 percent (Republic of Kenya, 1993, pp. 14, 18). During the 1997 general elections, women candidates contested five percent of the seats but won only nine seats which was 4.1 percent out of a total of 222 in parliament. The men had the majority; they won 213 seats 95.9 percent (CBS, 2002, pp. 79-80).

During the 2002 General Elections, only nine women 4.1 percent were elected as members of parliament which consisted of 222 members while the men were 213 which was 95.9 percent. Only one woman was appointed an assistant minister in President Moi's cabinet in 2002. Political parties attempted to raise the number of women in the National Assembly by nominating additional women (in 2002, 68 percent of the nominated members of parliament were women), compared to about 42 percent in (1997). Women accounted for 60 percent of the voting population. The current Parliament which came in power in December 2007 and ended in 2012 has 16 elected and six nominated female members out of 222 members which translates into only 10 percent female Members of Parliament. This figure is still below 30 percent, which is considered to be the critical mass for influencing decision making aimed at improving the status of women. Due to the introduction of multi-party politics and the development of the democratisation process, the government has nominated slightly more women to parliament (CBS, 2002, pp. 79-80).

Many women shun politics because of stereotyping, intimidation, and sociocultural attitudes which emanate from the Kenyan patriarchal family systems. Women candidates face both physical and emotional intimidation because of their vulnerability to rape, violence, and insults, while their personal security is often threatened. Furthermore, they have limited funding to sustain competitive campaigns (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008, pp. 34-35).

Despite the progress made in recent decades, the current political system in Kenya may not always guarantee fair play for women. The Presidential Decree of 2005 was that one third of the membership of all government and parastatal committees or Boards must be women. It was also decreed that 30 percent of all civil service jobs must be reserved for women. But these stipulations have been violated, and no monitoring and audit assessment has been effected to date to ensure the implementation of these directives (Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008, p. 51).

The new Constitution of Kenya, 2010 states that there will be 290 elected members in the National Assembly each representing a constituency. In addition, there will be 47 women elected to the National Assembly representing each of the 47 counties. There will also be a Senate in accordance with the Constitution of Kenya which will have 47 members elected by the registered voters of the counties. Women will benefit greatly in terms of numbers because in addition, they will also nominate 16 women to the Senate based on the strength of the political parties represented. Therefore, for the first time in Kenyan history during the 2012 elections women will have more representation in the National Assembly and in the Senate (Republic of Kenya, 2010, p. 65).

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