

Unsung heroes and heroines at Mutira Mission, Kenya (1907-2012)

*Julius Gathogo*¹

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,
Kenyatta University, Mombasa Campus, Mombasa, Kenya

Abstract

As the Anglican Church of Kenya, Kirinyaga Diocese, celebrated one hundred years of missionary Christianity in August 2012, a few heroes and heroines, in their struggle to liberate people from ignorance, poverty and other forms of “miasma” facing the people, were not given attention, or were even ignored altogether. The article sets out to retrieve the oral histories of pioneer African Christians at Mutira Mission, particularly the early professionals who became beacons of light shining brightly for the area. Among these are Thomas Meero, the pioneer African teacher, mason, carpenter, evangelist, businessman, farmer and lay church leader, Reuben Kinyua Kaara, the pioneer African nurse, laboratory technician and lay church leader, and Tabitha Karingo, the first woman to defy cultural practices that are inimical to the dignity of women. Were their struggles not worth attention? What factors contributed to their becoming makers of history in the area? What challenges did they encounter? Does the modern generation have something to learn from their pioneering roles? Did the Mau Mau war of political independence in Kenya affect the smooth running of missionary work? Such concerns inform the nature of this article. The methodology in this article relies largely on oral interviews and archival sources.

Introduction

Mutira Mission refers to the area covering the entire Kirinyaga Central, Kirinyaga West and Mwea West districts of Kirinyaga County, together with Mbeere West of Embu County in the central region of Kenya. This area was evangelised by European missionaries from the United Kingdom, of the Church Missionary Society (hereafter CMS) in the first half of the 20th century. It is here that the CMS established a centre at Njumbi village, otherwise called Mutira in November 1912. The mission started by one Rev AW McGregor and his team, began by opening of the Kabete centre in 1900, the Weithaga centre in 1904, the Kahuhia in 1906 and also Tumu Tumu in 1906 (later taken over by Presbyterians); Mutira was set to start after Tumu Tumu in 1907-1908. After passing through Mutira in 1907-08, and subsequently identifying the place where they ultimately established a mission centre, McGregor and his missionary caravan moved on to Kabare and Kigari-Embu in 1908-09 and by 1910 managed to open the latter centres. They later returned to Mutira in 1911 and continued from where they had left off. McGregor supervised the construction of the first church and a house for the incoming priest (Rev Brandon Laight) who was posted by the then Bishop of Mombasa Diocese (Rt Rev WG Peel) at the end of 1912. McGregor, the missionary team leader, was accompanied by some fellow Europeans and two Africans, namely Paul Kigonde and Thomas Meero. As will be noted, Meero, who came from Taveta on the Kenyan side of the border with Tanganyika (currently the United Republic of Tanzania), had been recruited by Rev McGregor as part of the missionary team. Previously, he had been trained in brickwork and carpentry in Moshi, Tanzania, by the CMS missionaries who had already opened a station there.

As Mutira marked its first centenary in August 2012 with lots of pomp and colour, the researcher, as an eyewitness and a participant observer, noted that the event failed to acknowledge some heroes and heroines who had helped put the tiny village of Njumbi-Mutira, Kirinyaga County, on the map of the world. Among the key characters are Thomas Meero the pioneer black missionary, his wife Mrs Jessie Mbeele, the pioneer professionals in the area such as Reuben Kinyua Kaara, the pioneer medical practitioner who was killed by the Mau Mau freedom fighters during the struggle for independence in 1953, and Tabitha Karingo – the first woman in the area to embrace Christianity as she openly rejected cultural dictatorships such as *guthambio* (wife inheritance) following the death of one’s spouse. In view of this background, the article seeks to repair the damage by retracing their efforts and re-establishing their pedigrees.

Thomas M Meero (1874-1964)

¹ Dr Julius Gathogo is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Kenyatta University, Mombasa Campus. PO Box 16778, Mombasa, Kenya, 80100. E-mail: jumgathogo@yahoo.com.

Thomas Meero came from Taveta District in the present-day Taita-Taveta County. He was a trained brickworker/carpenter, who was first invited to the church ministry of CMS by Rev AW McGregor, the team leader. In turn, McGregor had hired him to build his houses as he opened various centres in central Kenya – where members of the Kikuyu community reside. Since the Mutira Anglican Centre began as an outstation of Weithaga Mission in Fort Hall District, the CMS team operated from there as they opened it. They also operated from Weithaga Station as they opened the Kabare and Kigari centres. In turn, Mutira (and Kirinyaga County as a whole) was then part of the Mbiri administrative district of the protectorate government since 1895, and later a British colony from 1920 to 1963. Mbiri was later renamed Fort Hall District in 1901 after the death of the first District Commissioner, Lt Francis C Hall.² Fort Hall was renamed Murang'a in 1963. According to Sanderson Beck, John Boyes established a trading network in central Kikuyuland with the help of Karuri of the *Metumi* people (referring to inhabitants of the former Mbiri District), in 1898. Francis Hall selected a site for a fort at Mbiri in 1900. Late in 1902 the third fort in Kikuyuland was built at Nyeri. In 1904 the British fought the Ndia, Gicugu and Embu peoples, defeated them, and established Embu Station in 1906.³ Thomas Meero also witnessed the brutal British conquest of central Kenya under Captain Richard Henry Meinertzhagen (1878-1967), where in 1904 an estimated 797 residents from Fort Hall, Ndia and Gicugu and 250 inhabitants of the Embu lands were killed. It is ironic that after this expedition Meinertzhagen penned his prophetic words in his diary entry for 18 March 1904:

I am sorry to leave the Kikuyu, for I like them. They are the most intelligent of the African tribes [sic] that I have met; therefore they will be the most progressive under European guidance and will be the most susceptible to subversive activities. They will be one of the first tribes [sic] to demand freedom from European influence and in the end cause a lot of trouble. And if white settlement really takes hold in this country it is bound to do so at the expense of the Kikuyu, who own the best land, and I can foresee much trouble.⁴

As the colonial expeditions were taking place and forts getting established, Thomas Meero and other members of McGregor's missionary team concurrently continued with their missionary tasks. In light of this, Meero first reached Mutira via Fort Hall in 1907-08. As noted, he was part of McGregor's missionary team that came to survey the land where the Mutira Mission centre was to stand later. After the construction of the first grass-thatched Mutira church in October 1912, Meero, the pioneer black missionary in central Kenya, was first stationed in the neighbouring Kabare Mission centre. Indeed, archival sources confirm that he was among the first seven members of staff in Kabare Mission under Rev Crawford in 1910.⁵ The full staff membership of CMS Kabare Mission (in 1910) were Rev AW Crawford (chair and priest-in-charge), Mrs Crawford, Joseph Munyao (African missionary from Kamba-land of eastern Kenya), Thomas Meero (nom de plume Toma Bundi), Kathiu Njogu, Kamau Kinyuru and Musa Mumae (the local church cleaner who later became the first African clergy at Kabare pastorate in 1935).⁶

In 1915, Meero left Kabare Mission and joined Mutira Mission as a full-time church worker. He was appointed church catechist/evangelist, where he reportedly served remarkably well. Within the first five months of his appointment, the number of students at the Mutira primary school rose from 14 to 40. Sadly, not much is known about his extended family in Taveta where he was born – over 800 kilometres from the Mutira Mission centre. In view of this, pertinent questions beg to be answered: Did they convert to Christianity with him in the early days? Was he keen to keep in contact with his lineage in Taveta? As a matter of fact, he settled permanently at the Mutira Mission centre, where he was buried upon his death, in 1964, in the church compound.⁷

According to Meero's nephew, Joseph Mwangi wa Gatimu, Meero never returned to settle in his ancestral land, Taveta, on the borderline of Tanzania and Kenya, from 1900 till his death in 1964.⁸ He however made three short visits to his kin at Taveta. In particular, he visited them during the great famine of 1918 (*Ng'aragu ya Thika* or "the Thika death") that had hit the country. The 1918 famine was caused by locust invasions of the farms where they ate all the plants in the area surrounding Mutira. In turn, this forced Meero to

² Murang'a County and surrounding areas of central Kenya were referred to as Kenya District in the 19th century, while the present-day Kirinyaga and Embu counties were part of the then Trans-Tana Embu districts. In Murang'a Town, Francis Hall is buried together with others at Fort Hall Monument. Francis died of black water disease aged only 40.

³ Sanderson Beck, "East Africa, Arabs, and Europeans 1700-1856" quoted in *History of East Africa, Volume 1* ed. Roland Oliver and Gervase Mathew (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 417.

⁴ Col R Meinertzhagen, *Kenya Diary 1902-1906* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1957), 152.

⁵ CMS Archives: G3A5/1929/66.

⁶ See also James Munyambu Nyagah, *ACK, Kabare centenary celebrations (2010): A brief history of the church of Christ* (Nairobi: Kabare centennial celebrations, 2010), 65-66.

⁷ KNA: CMS 1/638: Mutira Log Book, entries for 15 June 1915, 9 November 1915.

⁸ Interview with Joseph Mwangi Gatimu, at Roswam Hotel, Kerugoya, on 20 November 2010. Mwangi who was born in 1958 was seven years old when Meero died in 1964.

return to his ancestral land, Taveta, to look for food so as to feed his fellow mission workers at Mutira. Once they brought food from Taveta to Mutira, Meero's team went on with the mission work. Shortly after, heavy harvests were experienced in the area surrounding Mutira parastate.

From Mutira in 1908, Meero with a team of European missionaries left for Kigari-Embu via the Kabare Mission centre. Mutira Mission could in fact have been established as early as 1908, but because of the delay caused by land transactions and resistance by the locals, mission work had to start much later. Reportedly, the buying of land was completed in 1911, though work on setting up the church can be said to have started in earnest in November 1912, when the first resident European missionary, Rev Brandon Laight, was posted there.

Meero first entered mission work in Moshi, in today's Tanzania, in June 1890. As noted earlier, his ancestral home, Taveta, is situated on the Kenyan side of the border with the Republic of Tanzania. Characteristically, a person on the border could visit either side of the border, provided he or she could find greener pastures in the respective areas. As it was Meero went to Moshi, Tanzania, and joined the Church Mission Society (CMS), which had already established a mission centre there. At Moshi Mission he was educated up to Standard Five. He also learnt carpentry and general construction work. At the same time, Meero enrolled in the catechism class which in turn culminated in his baptism in 1894. He was confirmed in 1895 by Alfred R Tucker, third Bishop of the CMS in the then Eastern Equatorial Africa region. Later in 1897, the Anglican Diocese of Eastern Equatorial Africa was divided into two: the Diocese of Uganda, under Bishop Tucker, and the Diocese of Mombasa, under Bishop AW Peel.

From these interactions with McGregor's team, he became very close to the European missionaries who had camped on the Taveta side of the Kenyan border. This friendship developed after their constant meetings during the weekends and holidays as Meero would from time to time visit his homestead at Taveta, where he would impress the European missionaries with his good command of the English language. In turn, the European missionaries saw a literate African who could be hired in the ongoing construction work. Upon his completion of studies and subsequent return to Taveta in 1892, McGregor urged him to join them as a member of the missionary staff. This ultimately happened. Certainly, it was unusual for missionaries to engage a black African, especially in the earlier period of the history of Christianity in Kenya and anywhere in Africa.

Marital challenges

In early 1900, Thomas Meero married a Taveta lady by the name Jessie Mbeele. This happened just as they were about to leave Taveta Mission to begin the first mission centre in central Kenya, namely Kabete in today's Kiambu County. Upon her marriage, Jessie became, by a confluence of history, part of McGregor's missionary team. She thus "enjoyed" her honeymoon in the course of their travels. After establishing Kabete Mission in 1900, they moved to Weithaga in Fort Hall District, currently called Murang'a County, in 1904. As fate would have it, Mbeele did not bear children with Meero. The lack of children from an African perspective was problematic to Meero as Africans attach much value to children. As such, this must have troubled them greatly, despite their Christian background. Indeed, the indigenous African society viewed childlessness as a punishment from God, probably after staid misdemeanour on the part of the couple. To this end, Jesse Mugambi says:

Procreation was very important in the African concept of marriage. A marriage in which children were not born was considered to be problematic, and sometimes a bride might be returned to her parents for such a reason. Polygamy was potentially allowed by custom, especially if earlier marriage did not produce children, or if the children born in earlier marriage were only girls. The birth of boys was considered to be very important, both for inheritance and for the defence of the community. It was also important as the means to perpetuate and expand family and clan.⁹

As Meero and the European missionary team moved from Taveta to Kikuyu (1900), then from the Kikuyu centre to Weithaga (1904), from Weithaga to Mutira (1907-8) and from Mutira (1908-9) to Kabare and Kigari (1909), Jessie Mbeele accompanied the team. In fact, they lived in church compounds, as Meero was always termed as a black missionary who deserved the status befitting that of his European counterparts. To this end, Mbeele stands out distinctly as an unsung heroine of the struggle, a fighter who worked hand-in-hand with her husband to liberate the people of central Kenya from harsh superstition, ignorance, disease and poverty. As her bones lie in an unmarked grave, probably in the Taveta District of Taita Taveta County, Mbeele remains an evangelist of the vast land of central and some eastern parts of Kenya. Her voice remains suppressed, but boldly written, probably, in God's register. Even though her biological womb hosted no child to Meero and society at large, her ecclesiastical role bore more "spiritual" children than the couple could have ever had biologically. Really, the mere reality that she supported Meero's ministry during the turbulent days of African Christianity in the early 1900s speaks volumes regarding her spiritual offspring. She thus became the unspoken mother of the

⁹ Jesse Mugambi, 1989. *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi: Longhorn), 100.

unnamed spiritual children who were eventually born after the couple “touched” the places they visited. Because of her efforts, the inhabitants of these places were no longer in darkness; rather education, Christianity, politics, businesses, good tarmac roads and infrastructural developments of the 21st century, among other things, are the by-products of this labour.

While at Kigari in 1910, Jessie Mbeele and Thomas Meero adopted a girl child. As they built various centres, they took her along to the Mutira Mission centre upon settling there in 1915. During the great famine of 1915 in Taveta and other coastal parts of Kenya, Meero’s niece, Edda Tundulu, left for Nairobi via the newly constructed Uganda railway (1896-1901), to look for her missionary uncle, whom she hoped could provide relief to her biting hunger. Upon reaching the Kabete Mission centre, she was surprised to learn that Meero had already left about ten years earlier. She was taken to Mutira in 1915 where Meero had just secured a full-time job as evangelist/catechist. At the time, Edda, who was born in 1900, was about 15 years old. Thomas and Jessie brought her up just as they would have done their own biological child. Since she was physically small, she was renamed Edda Kanini (Kanini among the locals meant “The Small One”) and was educated at the Mutira primary school up to Standard Four. She later married Nderi wa Kamindara in 1927 but later divorced after bearing four children, Gatimu (1928-2006), Kaguu (1930-), Wanjira (1932-) and Wamai (1943-).

After her divorce, Edda Tundulu went back to live with her uncle, Thomas Meero, who in turn educated her four children. At school, their surname was Meero, though their biological father was Nderi wa Kamindara. Edda was fluent in Kiswahili and the local Ndia-accented Kikuyu language and was a committed member of the local Emmanuel Church of Mutira. At the time of her death in 1991 she was living in the crowded Kagumo slum village and was buried in the church compound alongside her Uncle Meero. According to Edda’s grandson, Joseph Mwangi Gatimu, Edda was a dedicated Christian, a Mother’s Union member, and an established member of the East African Revival Fellowship until her death at the age of 91, in 1991.

Little is known about the whereabouts of Meero’s adopted child from the Kigari Mission centre. However, according to Edda’s grandson Mwangi Gatimu (interview 20 November 2012), she left Meero’s house after a bitter difference with Jessie Mbeele. Reports have it that she left for the Gichugu division of Kirinyaga County, in the neighbouring Kabare Mission, where she married during her teenage years.

After staying at Mutira Mission for about ten years (1915-1925), Mrs Jessie Mbeele expressed her desire to return to their ancestral land, Taveta. This caused tension, disagreement and general disharmony in the house. Coupled with the fact that they had no children of their own, save for the adopted girl child and Meero’s niece, Jessie and Meero’s relationship, as husband and wife, deteriorated from good to bad. In turn, this led to Mbeele’s abandonment of her matrimonial home and subsequent return to Taveta where they had originally come from. Consequently, this marital disharmony complicated Thomas Meero’s church ministry. Apparently he was isolated by his fellow church members. Thereafter, he was seen as “a divorced lay church minister” who did not deserve to work for the church. As a “wayward” brother who had “divorced his wife”, Meero’s previous catechism teachings began to work against him. His former students, turned church elders, felt he no longer had moral authority to stand as a servant of the Lord in the sacred ministry where family stability was a supreme requirement.

Weighed down by these saddening developments, Meero was forced to go to the Supreme Court of Kenya in Mombasa, in 1932, and file a divorce case in order to terminate his marriage to Jessie Mbeele. This request was granted in 1933 after he successfully convinced the court that their marriage was nonexistent, as Jessie had already deserted their matrimonial home, injuring him professionally in the process. He effectively convinced the court that granting the divorce was the only way that could allow him to remarry and thereby get back his job as the catechist/evangelist in the Mutira church. In 1934, Meero married Milkah Kabuci, a Kikuyu from the Mutira area with wedding vows taking place in Embu Town. His best man was Hosea Mbui wa Ndegwa and the best lady was Esther Muthoni Mbui. Like Jessie before her, Milkah Kabuci did not bear any child. Milkah lived with Meero for 30 years (1934-1964). Born in 1905 and dying on 5 October 2009, Milkah lived for 104 years.

Pioneer businessman

Meanwhile, when Thomas Meero was isolated and suspended as a church worker for divorcing Jessie Mbeele in the 1930s, he turned to business as well as carpentry and masonry work. Following his re-marriage to Milkah Kabuci, he was re-admitted by the church in 1945. Considered the co-founder of the church in Mutira, Meero deserved empathy. He remained as a church worker till he retired in 1953 at 70. Being a pioneer teacher, catechist, evangelist, carpenter as well as a mason, it was difficult for the church to abandon him completely, as he remained a resourceful person who could be consulted occasionally.

Apart from his critical role in founding the Mutira primary school, his pioneering carpentry, building and construction, and his catechism, Meero was also a pioneer businessman. His businesses included a *posho* mill, trade in wattle bark (*magoko*) -- a business he taught Johana Njumbi, the first African clergy in the area. He was

also a shopkeeper. Rev Canon John Mararo recalls seeing the inscription on his business premises, “Thomas Nelson Meero & Co”, in a building that stands to this day, opposite Karigu-ini Restaurant in Kagumo Town.

According to Rev Symon Kigundu, who was the pastor to his wife Milkah Kabuci until her death in 2009, Meero’s family was left in abject poverty. After his death, it was difficult to trace his scattered property. He had partnered with dishonest associates.¹⁰ When Milkah Kabuci Meero died in October 2009, the new Kamuiru parish, which was once an outstation of the Mutira parish, was in crisis as the church elders did not know where to bury her body. According to African cultural traditions, the wife of such a great maker of history could not be buried in any cemetery or in any unmarked grave; yet Meero had not left any known piece of land. In Kigundu’s view, Meero lacked people to connect him to the local clan (*Agaciku*) where he could have been ritually born into the community. Certainly, a non-member of the Kikuyu nation can own land after a ritual in which she or he is “reborn”. This is done through the ceremonial slaughtering of an unblemished goat or sheep. After the ceremonial adoption she or he becomes a part of the community, hence a clan member.

In this way Dr Edmund Crawford, a Canadian medical doctor working with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and based in Embu Town, was ritually born.¹¹ In 1910, he sought to join the Embu Council of Elders in the hope of influencing society from within. And for his entrance fee, “he presented the elders with a bull and there was a great feast”.¹² This caused the Embu elders to recognise him as one of their own, and his “religion” as part of theirs. In turn, they promised him “that they would now insist on all the people keeping God’s Day and attending service, and that he was to be the leading elder *Muthamaki*”.¹³ Indeed such gestures paid dividends. Afterwards, Dr Crawford remained a respected African elder in the area. For outstanding personalities such as Meero, a ritual rebirth would have been relatively easy. This drives one to wonder: Why didn’t Meero follow Dr Crawford’s example? Did he trust Jesus so blindly to the extent of regarding material resources in the form of land as unnecessary, believing that Jesus satisfies in every circumstance? Or was he so steeped in white missionary Christianity that he did not perceive this “pagan ritual” to be important?

The latter could be the case; for Meero’s approach to Christianity appears largely conservative, as he chose to ignore African culture that would have allowed him polygamy in matters regarding his childless marriage. He however had the resolve to go to court and then remarry almost immediately after the court granted him divorce. He was also liberal, as evidenced by the fact that despite being a strict Anglican adherent he partnered in business with practising Roman Catholics such as Munene Kibuga -- the proprietor of Karigu-ini Restaurant in Kagumo Town -- with whom they jointly owned a *posho* (maize) mill and engaged in the *magoko* (wattle-bark) business – and which eventually failed.¹⁴

Disciplined operator

Going through his diaries one notices that Meero was a disciplined person, who wrote down everything he planned to do on a daily basis. He honoured his pledges and stuck to his promises. He was politically involved and would liaise with Rev Butcher (the second European clergyman in the area from 1919-26) to influence civic policies during Chief Njega wa Gioko’s reign.¹⁵ Some of the issues that Meero would take to Chief Gioko for consideration and decisive action included land disputes, the Mau Mau war of independence crisis and social conflicts, among other things. As an advisor to Chief Gioko, Meero pleaded with him to stop European settlers from settling in the Mwea Division of Kirinyaga County. His reasoning was that Mwea would be better off as a grazing land and not as a settlement farm. Another case is where he fought hard to bring Kagumo Town to its present geographical location. Initially, Assistant Chief Ndegwa wa Kimere wanted to retain the town at Kangware, near Mununga Tea Factory, but in 1933 Meero went to petition the paramount chief, Njega wa Gioko, for Kagumo Town to be brought to its present site. His argument was that since the main road to Kerugoya, Karatina and Nyeri towns passed through the present site the people of Mutira Mission would be served better if the town was strategically placed. And as a businessman-cum-evangelist, he saw that a thriving business would do well if the three neighbouring towns were easily connected through the road transport network. Even though the Assistant Chief (Ndegwa Kimere) opposed it from the outset, Meero succeeded when Chief Njega sent him to the incoming Assistant Chief Kagai and ordered him to implement the proposal with the urgency it deserved. Today, Kagumo Town is loosely called *Gwa Kagai*, meaning “Kagai’s Place”, because Kagai implemented the idea that originally came from Meero. Indeed, Meero remains the unsung hero who worked from behind the scenes to see to it that things were sorted out. Unfortunately no school, hospital, road or institution in the area is named after him despite his pioneering roles in the area.

¹⁰ Interview with Rev Symon Kigundu, Gathuthi-ini, at Canon Ngoro’s compound, 27 October 2010.

¹¹ See Julius Gathogo, 2008. “The Quest for Religious Freedom in Kenya (1887-1963)” *Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae*, South Africa, XXXIV (1), (July 2008), 67-92.

¹² For details see John Karanja, *Founding an African Faith* (Nairobi: Uzima, 1999), 72.

¹³ For details see John Karanja, *Founding an African Faith*, 72.

¹⁴ Interview with Rev Symon Kigundu, Gathuthi-ini, at Canon Ngoro’s compound, 27 October 2010.

¹⁵ Chief Njega wa Gioko reigned from 1901 to 1947.

Meero's death

Thomas Mero finally died on 15 November 1964 and was laid to rest in the church compound in a grave near the Mutira nursing home that is currently under construction. Rev J Muturi conducted the burial ceremony. According to Rev Canon John Mararo, who attended his burial, Meero remained a respected man in the area.¹⁶ As he walked through neighbouring Kagumo Township, the locals would call him *Meero wa Mission* ("Meero of the Mission"). Although Meero had problems with his marriage, the church which he co-founded honoured and gave him a hero's burial within the church compound. Ordinarily, a Christian who gets involved in court battles over a failed marriage would be seen as a wayward backslider whose sins could not easily be forgiven, and thus ineligible for such an honour. He or she may not receive Christian rites upon his death; but in Meero's case it was different for he had significantly contributed to the rebirth of society, particularly as a black missionary. Certainly, as Mutira Mission marked its first centenary (1912-2012), history would be incomplete without recalling his heroic deeds. As noted earlier, the area is heavily beholden to him for its religio-social growth.

Tabitha Karingo (1871-1943)

Another important heroine at Mutira Mission is Karingo (1871-1943) -- a woman who accepted Christianity at a very early stage and received her baptismal name Tabitha. Tabitha Karingo, who lost her husband Mururia (also called Kiragu) at the mature age of 40, refused to subscribe to the African cultural ritual of wife inheritance. Wife inheritance was referred to as *guthambio*. It literally means "being ritually washed". Mururia's¹⁷ brothers tried to inherit her but to no avail as she considered it unethical to do so. She left her homestead in mid-1913 and settled at Mutira Mission in order to seek refuge with the CMS missionaries who were opposed to certain African cultural practices. By moving to the missionary centre, she wanted to strengthen her newly acquired Christian faith. For this, she was severely isolated by the area as a "traitor". "How can she betray our cherished traditions that have existed from time immemorial? Does she want to behave like the Europeans? How can she rush to embrace the foreigners' religion even when we have not understood it fully? Again, don't we have ours?" they would wonder.¹⁸ Tabitha Karingo and Mururia had been blessed with five children: Wairangi (the firstborn),¹⁹ Wanduma,²⁰ Nathan, Ishmael Gaita and Waruguru.

With regard to her pedigree, Tabitha Karingo's ancestral roots can be traced from the neighbouring Mukurwe-ini district in today's Nyeri County. In turn, Nyeri borders Kirinyaga County where Mutira Mission is geographically located. The people residing around Mutira Mission are largely the Ndia subgroup of the Kikuyu nation. Tabitha had been traded for food during the great famine that hit Mukurwe-ini people of Nyeri County during the second half of the 19th century. At the time she was in her teens – around 13. By the time Mururia married her at around 18, she was an adolescent in need of parental care. Mutira-Ndia was a bread basket of wealth, a place blessed with clean rivers, rich valleys and hills, never-failing rains, good climate and lots of food, and Karingo's brother had a ready market for her.

As it turned out, Karingo's story compares well with that of the biblical Joseph. Indeed, the Book of Genesis tells that Joseph, the favourite son of Jacob, was the 11th of Jacob's 12 sons and Rachel's firstborn. It tells how Joseph came to be sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers, and how in spite of this he rose to become the second most powerful man in Egypt after Pharaoh. In Joseph prospered in this foreign land, and when famine struck the Hebrew nation he brought his father and brothers and their households, 70 persons in all, to Egypt, where Pharaoh assigned to them the land of Goshen. As fate would have it, Joseph lived to see his great-grandchildren, and on his death bed exhorted his brethren, if God would remember them and lead them out of the country, to take his bones with them. The book ends with Joseph's remains being "put in a coffin in Egypt" (for details see Genesis 30, 37, 39-50).

As noted earlier, Tabitha Karingo sought refuge in the mission centre as she was trying to escape another persecution, now by her brothers-in-law who had already become rivals as they competed in their bid to inherit her following Mururia's death in 1912. Of course she was also protesting the way they were competing for her without even seeking her opinion regarding the weighty matter, or even her children's views. In her running away from a repressive cultural practice she found others who had similar views. Among them was one Kinyua (1890-1930), who was later nicknamed Kamoni after he rejected the cultural practice requiring every man or woman to have his or her ears marked or pierced. For this rebellion against culture, Kinyua like Tabitha was also seen as a "traitor". As a result, Kamoni, as he later became known, went and built a grass-thatched hut near

¹⁶ Interview with Rev Canon John Mararo, Cool Breeze Hotel – Mombasa, 11 November 2010.

¹⁷ Mururia's other names were Murage and Kiragu. In view of this, children named after him are given any of the three names.

¹⁸ Interview with Phillip Mwangi Gaita at his Kagumo trading house, on 18 November 2010.

¹⁹ Wairangi's daughter, Esther Karingo, married Odham Kaniaru. She bore Wairangi Kaniaru and Elsaphan Muriithi (also Gichira) among others.

²⁰ Wanduma, daughter of Kiragu (Wanduma), was the mother to Josphat Gathogo, Joyce Wakirunda and Leonard Kiragu.

the mission centre as he sought protection from the cultural chauvinists. The word *kamoni* comes from the prefix “ka” (meaning “that of”) and suffix “moni” meaning the lower part of the ear, which was pierced. Henceforth Kinyua would loosely be called *wakamoni*, or the one whose ears had no markings or were “not pierced”. As the saying goes, “birds of a feather fly together”, and Kamoni had a good working relationship with Tabitha as both had converted to Christianity during the turbulent days of cultural repression. Curiously, Kamoni later married Tabitha’s second-born Wanduma (1900-1978) and together they bore Josphat Gathogo (1918-1978),²¹ Joyce Wakirunda (1923-2010), wife of Laban Rukenya, and Leonard Kiragu (1928-2011). Strangely, Kamoni’s wife did not convert to Christianity during his lifetime. She was only baptised in the 1970s, and subsequently christened “Jane”, after virtually everyone in the area had become a Christian. Hence she accepted Christianity on the grounds that the European religion had conquered African religion. Thus, she “mourned” rather than rejoiced when she was baptised! Kamoni²² had died over 30 years earlier. Tabitha Karingo, like the biblical Joseph, died of old age in 1943.

Early professionals at Mutira Mission

By 1920, missionaries at Mutira had begun to prepare professionals who were to lead in the growth of the society. According to Philip Mwangi Gaito, a senior businessman and local leader, the professions that were first introduced by the European missionaries in the Mutira pastorate were masonry, teaching and nursing.²³ I shall attempt to focus on each of them.

Early mason/contractor professionals

The first contractor in the Mutira area was Thomas Meero who was an excellent carpenter though he also did a lot of masonry work. At first, Meero was the only African who built jointly with the Europeans who were camping at the mission centre. In particular, the first buildings for the Mutira church and the primary school were built by them, as no local African then had training as a professional builder. Later on, Meero was joined by Marko Kangi who assisted him. Afterwards, other masons/contractors emerged such as Justus Ngari wa Riua, Paulo wa Warui and Ishmael Gaito. According to Charles Makumi, a local elder and one of the second-generation professionals in the area, they used to train at Murang’a and Mathari in Nyeri.²⁴

Josphat Gathogo (1918–1978) is categorised in the second group of masons/contractors to appear at the Mutira pastorate and in Kirinyaga County. As building and construction gained momentum, the second group found itself with more work than those who had trained previously. Josphat was first inspired by his uncle Ishmael Gaito (1904-1966), who was in the first group. While Ishmael trained as a mason/contractor in the early 1930s, Josphat trained in the late 1930s. Some see Gaito as the pioneer mason/contractor around the Mutira Mission centre. Contrary to Makumi’s view, Kiragu Kamoni, Gaito’s nephew, explained that Gaito was trained in what was referred to as the native training district (NTD) of Kabete and not Mathari or Murang’a. Gaito later left construction work to pioneer as a public health technician. He also pioneered as the first principal of Kaitheri Village Polytechnic – during the Emergency period (in the 1950s).

After sitting for his Common Entrance Certificate at the Mutira primary school, Josphat Gathogo proceeded to NTD Kabete. This came after Ishmael convinced him that masonry was a fine profession. The fact that the country was moving towards modern buildings and general reconstruction made the masonry and construction industry worthwhile. The impetus for construction work was boosted by the belief in those days that it was a well-paid occupation. Makumi avers that he started hearing about Gathogo as a hardworking contractor before the Mau Mau war of independence broke out (around 1950).

Prior to the declaration of the State of Emergency in the then Kenya colony by the British government, Josphat Gathogo and Paulo wa Warui were working as builders/contractors at Kariobangi, Nairobi. From their base at Kariobangi, they would travel to various parts of Nairobi to do construction work, especially building houses for Indians who were very active economically. It was only in 1973 that Charles Makumi joined Gathogo to erect the Mutira Farmers Society buildings after a contract was given to him (Josphat). Others who worked on this project included Gatithi Mbunya. Again, during the era of Rev Johana Muturi as the priest-in-charge of the Mutira pastorate, Josphat Gathogo and Charles Makumi were contracted to build two classes of the Mutira primary school in 1973. At the time, the headmaster was Mr Eliud Macuki. Other public buildings that Gathogo was contracted to construct include the current St Thomas Cathedral of Kerugoya, in 1976, the

²¹ Josphat Gathogo was born around 1918, as the firstborn of Wanduma (d/o Kiragu-Mururia) and Kamoni wa Gathogo. In turn, Kamoni had a brother who was called Kaara. Although Kaara was the elder brother, he followed Kamoni and settled near the Mutira Anglican mission; and in turn he bore Reuben Kinyua (one of the pioneer nurses), Richard Mbogo and Ngando Kaara.

²² Kinyua (Kamoni) had two sisters, namely Wangeci Kathogo, w/o Mugambi, and Wanduru. Wangeci, d/o Kathogo, was the grandmother to Beatrice Kagure the wife of Naftaly Kinyua Kaara.

²³ Interview with Phillip Mwangi Gaito at his Kagumo trading house, on 18 November 2010.

²⁴ Interview with Mzee Charles Makumi on 21 November 2010, at his Kariko house, near Mutira Mission centre. Makumi was born in 1925.

Kiarugu primary school, part of the Kamuiru primary school, some shops in Kibingo, Kianyaga, Kerugoya, Baricho and Kagumo among others, and some classrooms in the Mutitu and Getuya primary schools, among others. By 2012, masonry as a profession had become so prominent in the so-called old Mutira pastorate that one may be tempted to think it was like this from the very beginning -- yet it involved only a handful of people before the 1980s. The pioneers certainly set the pace!

Early medical professionals

Another critical profession that was introduced by the European missionaries is the practice of medicine, for which nurses and laboratory technicians were trained. As the missionaries tried to dissuade people from resorting to traditional medicine, which they deemed inferior, they encouraged the local people to take an interest in western medicine and medical practice in general. To this end, Zachariah wa Gakure, the father to Mathayo Gakure, became the first African medical practitioner, after he was trained as a nurse. The second African medical practitioner in the old Mutira pastorate was Mzee Ezekiah. He came from the Mutitu area (commonly known as Kiawaruguru). Before the 1950s, his father's family resided near the Kagumo coffee factory, about 600 metres from the Mutira Mission centre. The third African medical practitioner in Mutira was Reuben Kinyua Kaara. Reuben, as he was popularly called, was more educated than Zachariah and Ezekiah.

According to his firstborn son, Wilson Murimi, Reuben had attended various schools before he settled on the medical profession. He attended the Mutira primary school in Kagumo-Nyeri and NTD Kabete, where he trained as a nurse.²⁵ He later went to work at the Kerugoya hospital, around 1930. By then, the Kerugoya hospital was bigger than the Embu hospital. In addition, Kerugoya had a vegetable-growing business during the Second World War (1939-45). Unlike Embu town, Kerugoya had other industries as well as plenty of food. He built up his business within the compound that is currently occupied by the District Commissioner, while the current building which hosts Kerugoya's police headquarters was the factory's main office. Additionally, Kerugoya had a heavy European presence that contributed largely to the economic wellbeing of the town.

It was when Reuben Kinyua (1912-1953) went to work in Kerugoya in the 1930s that he first learnt to use the microscope and this is when his interest in being a laboratory technician began. It is from there that he went to NTD Kabete to study. Upon his successful completion of studies at Kabete, Reuben returned to Mutira. It is from there that he easily secured a job with the CMS as a laboratory technician. He also doubled as a nurse. During his stay at Mutira Mission (1930s to early 1950s), he was largely seen as generous and friendly. His generosity is seen in the fact that he paid for the education of his cousin, Kiragu Kamoni, and his younger brother, Ngando Kaara. He also assisted many other people whose names could not be established in the course of research. As a counsellor, he would invite the initiates of African traditional circumcision under Mzee Mararo²⁶ to the Mutira dispensary and administer modern medicine in his desire to ensure a "quick recovery" following initiation. In other words, he would see them through the recovery process. His assistants included Mikah wa Karingi and Peter Wamagunya among others. He also trained Cyrus Wamicii, also called Ciira wa Paulo Kangi, as a nurse. Reuben's age mate, Isabella Wanjiku Githaiga, daughter of Chief Ndegwa Kimere, recalls that Reuben encouraged the locals to use modern medicine and attend the dispensary, rather than relying on traditional herbs only.²⁷

Characteristically, Reuben always criticised his father's age mates who were reluctant to take their children to school. To demonstrate the seriousness of the matter, he would visit them and complain bitterly while urging them to see the need for formal education. Since he was feared and respected, most of the elders would accept the idea of modern education and ultimately take their children to school as well as to the local church. In particular, Nguri Mbiti used to admit that were it not for the fact that Reuben urged his grandfather Mbiti wa Kaburi to educate him, he could not have gone to school. Similarly, Kangi Kaburi is beholden to Reuben Kinyua for his education. In 1934, Reuben married Gladys Mukiri, daughter of Gacibiri Njiru, at the District Commissioner's office in Embu. Because of his professional skills the missionaries excused him for not having married in church. Gladys and Reuben bore two children: Rose Muthoni (1939-2005) and Wilson Murimi (1942-). Sadly, Gladys died in early 1944 after a sudden illness. Reuben remarried Margaret Wakanugu Ngairi around 1945. With Margaret, Reuben bore Edith Wangu, wife of the Hon James Kibicho, and Elsaphan Muriuki among other children.

During the Mau Mau insurgency (in the 1950s), the Mutira pastorate and the entire Kikuyu nation was split as brothers, relatives and neighbours viewed one another with suspicion. Some fought; some killed and were killed and others migrated to other places. In particular, people were divided between pro- and anti-government feelings. Reuben Kinyua was classified as pro-colonial government and hence a traitor to the African drive for self-determination and freedom. Why? First, Reuben was employed by the CMS, a UK religious body, which was seen as pro-government. Ironically, those who were injured during the war of

²⁵ Interview with Wilson Murimi Reuben, at my Mutira house, on 21 November 2010.

²⁶ Rev Canon John Mararo, the administrative secretary of Kirinyaga Diocese, is named after him.

²⁷ Interview with Isabella Wanjiku Githaiga, at her Kandegwa home, Muragara, six kilometres from the mission centre.

independence were nursed by him – even when they were escorted by the Europeans. Second, he had previously refused to take the Mau Mau oath. His rejection of the oath, conducted in the 1940s, was on the grounds that “Africans need independence and not the oath” and that “the way to independence is not necessarily violence”. Third, Isabella Wanjiku adds another dimension to Reuben’s killing -- the desire by radical Mau Mau operators to illicitly acquire free medicines so as to take them to their forest hideouts. According to her, Reuben would say no to such schemes: “Let whoever wants to be treated come to the dispensary. I will give him or her medical services. You cannot administer medicine unprofessionally, [because] they [may be dangerous and] can equally kill.” This is what Reuben would tell whoever wanted free tablets. Fourth, as a Christian, he did not see the need for another oath, as Jesus’s crucifixion, death and resurrection was “enough universal oath”. How can you “swear to shed blood, even if it is for a just cause, when Jesus did it for all humanity?” he would wonder as he spoke to his close confidants. Reuben’s approach in the ongoing conflict (Mau Mau versus government) was to work for harmony, like Chief Stephen Ngigi Machere who belonged to the group that held the view of “let’s dialogue rather than fight”. In their meetings, Dauti Kamwana, Chief Waruhiu of today’s Kiambu County, and Jomo Kenyatta among others would be in attendance. In his confessions to Wilson Murimi Reuben, in 1983, Ngigi Machere had taken the Kenya African Union (KAU) political party oath but not the Mau Mau oath. Ngigi was Reuben’s age mate at the time of Reuben’s death.

For the “sin” of not taking the oath, he became a targeted man. On the other hand, if he took the Mau Mau oath, he would have been detained by the colonial authorities; and hence, people in the area would have had no one to offer them medical services. He thus lived under this psychologically torturing dilemma till he was “free at last”. Unfortunately “identified” non-partakers were beheaded by gangs of freedom fighters that employed guerrilla tactics in their bid to advance their cause. Reuben, on the other hand, was useful to both sides, as he treated both pro- and anti-government groups. Should he meet the same fate as others who rejected the oath and face beheading? Reportedly, as Reuben remained a wanted man, the Mau Mau operators were also torn: Should we spare him or kill him? A tiny extremist group insisted that Reuben should die.

In 1953, a radical Mau Mau group broke into the Mutira church, stole church records and medicines from the dispensary and then went to Reuben Kinyua’s home. In his homestead, they forced him out of the house in front of his terrified family, conducted a kangaroo court by interrogating him and subsequently sentenced him to death. After shooting him dead, they slashed him across the stomach.

Meanwhile, a note was left at the Mutira dispensary by one General J Christo, claiming that he had committed the murder. When the Mau Mau moderates learnt that Reuben had been killed, they warned the radicals to look for another forest to operate from, unless they too wished to die. This forced the radicals to flee towards Embu on the eastern side of Mutira. Upon reaching the Njuki-ini forest, while armed with Mutira church records, two were killed by Government Security Guards (commonly known as Home Guards) and the records were recovered. One prized item that was never recovered however was the microscope. General J Christo, who had left a note at Reuben’s murder scene, was finally killed at Kiamugo near Reuben Kinyua’s home in the same year, 1953, in his wanderings to find a place to hide from the authorities.

People around the Mutira Mission centre panicked following Reuben Kinyua’s murder. They left en masse to settle at Mutitu Chief’s camp which offered far better security. The area was in deep shock because Reuben had been a pillar of strength. Isabella Wanjiku, daughter of Chief Ndegwa Kimere, recalls that a strong sense of loss engulfed most of Ndia and Kirinyaga. Later, people became very sick as most hospitals were destroyed, abandoned without Reuben, as “the world came to a standstill”.²⁸ Again, business at the nearby Kagumo market came to a standstill as the government confiscated people’s property in its bid to impoverish the “naughty people” who had killed an outstanding professional. Some of the confiscated items included cattle, sheep and goats. They were taken to Ahiti-Ndomba, in Kutus Town. This confiscation was meant to weaken support for the Mau Mau. Additionally, the government reinforced its security, sending people into concentration camps such as Kabonge. Further, the military was stationed and reinforced at Kabonge and Kamuruana, west and north of the Mutira Mission centre. Kagumo Town remained a ghost town where only the Home Guards could be seen on patrol. It certainly was a time of war.

During the war, most churches, schools and dispensaries in the Mutira pastorate and beyond were closed. Only the Catholic church remained open at Kerugoya Town. And since every Christian who had not taken the oath was being targeted by Mau Mau fighters, Christians, in turn, acquired guns to guard their homes and prepare for a major counterattack.²⁹ It is against this background that some people defected from the Anglican to the Catholic church, as the Catholic church was the only one which was active and had a few of her schools running, especially in Kerugoya Town.

²⁸ Interview with Isabella Wanjiku Githaiga, at her Kandegwa home, Muragara, six kilometres from the mission centre (21/11/2011).

²⁹ Interview with Isabella Wanjiku Githaiga.

Early teaching professionals

Another critical profession was teaching. Again, Thomas Meero was the African pioneer in this profession. He led in the construction of the Mutira primary school. As noted earlier, he taught the first pupils alongside the Europeans. Nevertheless, he was professionally a carpenter. Among the local Africans who pioneered the teaching profession were Peter Gatangi, Michael Karuga Ngairi, Jeffitha Karimurio, Justin King'uru Karoki and Jason Gathumbi. The first African Head Teacher was Peter Gatheru (1930-1934). At one stage, he was described by the Rev Canon Bewes, the missionary in the neighbouring Kabare mission, as an excellent worker:

Peter Gatheru, an old High School boy is now in charge (of the school) and is doing extremely well. The Rev Johana Njumbe (deacon) is living at Mutira, and is in charge of the pastoral work there. His wife conducts classes for women. The dispensary was opened at the beginning of 1934.³⁰

Later in 1932, Mr Gathumbi worked hand-in-hand with Mr Justin King'uru Karoki to supervise the Mutira primary school, when the first African Head Teacher Peter Gatheru (1930-1934) left for Nairobi.³¹ Among the people who studied around this time are Hosea Mbui, Jeremiah Kimengi, Eliud Njiraini Machuki and Leonard Mwangi Kathuki. Later, Arthur Gitura became the third African headmaster and taught Jackan Kangangi, Tirus Kagucia and his wife, and Leonard Mwangi Kathuki.

Of interest is that both Michael Karuga Ngairi and Justin King'uru Karoki later joined the provincial administration and became Sub-Chief and Senior Chief respectively. In other words the governing authorities drew from the teaching profession, especially for recruiting the civil servants. The retired Assistant Chief Joshua Koigu, son of Chief Ndegwa Kimere, however feels that the appointment of chiefs, in particular, stemmed from the people as it was they who proposed to the colonial authorities whom they wanted.³² Koigu however fails to appreciate that, in spite of whoever the people may have proposed, the authorities always favoured trained teachers and thereby give them first priority in the choice of chiefs or other administrators. Researches conducted in the old Mutira pastorate show that 90 percent of those who were appointed as administrators were teachers by training. This trend continued even after independence in 1963. This shows the ruling authorities' preference for teachers, especially in administrative matters.

Conclusion

This article began by introducing Mutira Mission which is situated in the central part of Kenya. Central Kenya was evangelised by European missionaries of the CMS from 1900 to 1912, where they finally established a centre at Njumbi village, otherwise called Mutira, in November 1912. It has also sought to highlight the unsung African heroes and heroines of Mutira Mission whose socio-religious contribution is huge, particularly in the introduction of Christianity to the area. This includes the first professionals such as contractors, teachers and nurses. Ironically, these heroes and heroines were shunned by the area in all ways possible: some were killed during the Mau Mau war of independence (in the 1950s) and in post-colonial Kenya; others were isolated, while others generally went unrecognised. This article thus sought to bring to readers' attention that while Mutira Mission celebrated its first centenary in 2012, where choirs sang in praise of European pioneers such as Rev McGregor, Laight, Butcher and Hillard, the indigenous pioneers who accepted Christianity in its earliest stages deserve our attention because they risked their lives as they sought to take society to greater levels. Cultural conservatism was certainly at its most extreme. Indeed, Mutira Mission and the larger Ndia subgroup of the Kikuyu nation and the vast area of Kirinyaga County are the way they are due to their bold contributions. Indeed, the 21st century can learn a lot from their contributions to society and probably learn from their mistakes. Mutira Mission grew like a mustard seed, also from very small beginnings: no local professionals, no African clergy, no ordination of women, no church buildings and no solid membership. One hundred years later, one can easily see the huge difference. Offspring from the faithful of the old Mutira Mission have provided Kenya, Africa, and the rest of the world, with professors, doctors, lawyers, judges, administrators, senior political and ecclesiastical leaders, engineers and historians, among many other talented people. Certainly, the once ignored and "desolate" valleys have finally earned a place in the annals of history! Hasn't this mustard seed grown into a magnificent tree, despite the growing pains? Surely, "If you have faith as a grain of Mustard seed ... nothing will be impossible to you" (Matthew 17:20).

³⁰ Keith Cole, *The Cross Over Mount Kenya: A Short History of the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Mount Kenya (1900-1970)* (Melbourne: Ridley College, 1970), 65.

³¹ Keith Cole, *The Cross Over Mount Kenya*: 65.

³² Interview with Joshua Koigu Ndegwa at his Kamugoiyo home, near Mununga Tea Factory, on 21 November 2010. The retired Assistant Chief, Joshua Koigu, is the son to the legendary Chief Ndegwa wa Kimere.

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