

CURSES AND CURSING AMONG THE AGĪKŪYŪ: SOCIO-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BENEFITS

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This article examines the concept “curses” and the practice of “cursing” among the Agīkūyū of Kenya and draws out the emerging insights and interpretations indicating their socio-cultural and religious benefits.

The enigmatic phenomenon is that there is a real phobia for “curses” and “cursing” and yet these practices are still conserved as invaluable elements in the African people’s concrete historical life. Whatever discipline one may belong to and the faith affiliation one adheres to, one finds oneself posing questions- and in some cases questioning the questions- as follows: What is a curse and what is cursing? Is fear of curses grounded on any rational belief? Who is entitled to proclaim curses? What is the main objective in cursing? Who are the recipients and why? Can any good emerge from curses and cursing? Why does a curse scare some and spare others, terrify some and horrify others? What good or evil does it render to the recipient? Are curses monolithic or are they multifaceted? What are their implications in the socio-cultural and religious realms? These and others of similar nature are the concerns of this Article with a specific focus on the Agīkūyū community.

Introductory Reflections

In many African communities, the fear of curses and cursing is real. A curse is a disturbing anguish in life and living. It does not matter whether one is a leader; educated or uneducated; restless youth or an elder; medicine man or a soothsayer; sorcerer or witch; polygamist or monogamist; celibate churchmen and women, or laity; man endowed with virility and fecundity; or woman blessed with femininity cum fruitfulness; pauper or billionaire; a peace maker or a peace breaker. The underlying factor is that of curse and cursing phobia. It is a fear which is so indispensable among many Africans’ life and living that even the Western or Eastern mainstream world religions¹ have not managed to annihilate. It is such an incredible phenomenon whose anxiety and wonder remains. But still, curses conservatively guide, guard and influence the

Africans in their socio-cultural and religious life and this points to something positive which seems to add value not only to one's life as an individual but also to the community.

Socio-Cultural and Historical Setting of the Agĩkũyũ

The Agĩkũyũ are an agrarian, matrilineal, Bantu community with a remarkable, vitalistico-communal-relational world view belonging to both *mariika* (age-groups and generations) and the full nine *mĩhĩrĩga* (clans) named after the nine daughters of their founding ancestors. They believe in Gĩkũyũ as their founder father and Mũmbi as their founder mother. For them, *Mwene-Nyaga* is the One and Only *Ngai* (God), whom they worship and adore.

The Agĩkũyũ are scattered all over Kenya, but their ancestral territory is to be found in the counties of Kĩambu, Mũranga, Nyeri, Kĩrĩnyaga and Nyandarũa.

A critical observation reveals that the Agĩkũyũ social structure has remained substantially conservative and unchanged. Mũriũki (1969:50) asserts that the family is made of husband, wife (wives) and their children. This is the nucleus of the Agĩkũyũ society. A group of families (*nyũmba*) form *mbari* (kinship). The *nyũmba* (group of families) emerges from the nine original *mĩhĩrĩga* (clans). A *nyũmba* is by itself a *mũcii* (homestead). A collection of *mũcii* (homesteads) makes up an *itũũra* (numerous fairly extensive homesteads or small villages). In this is found the network of social and political bond of the community. The *matũũra* (sing. *Itũũra*) compose a *mwaki* (literally, fire) which is a segment of a *rũgongo* (ridge). The *ng'ongo* (ridges) combined make a *bũrũri* (country) (Mũriũki, 1969:50). All these are in turn mainly strengthened by the *mariika* (age-groups). Anybody or phenomenon seen to be severing the above social organisation not only incurs a curse, but is taken to be a curse personified. On the other hand, whoever or whatever positively enhances these bonds within this invaluable family solidarity acquires blessings. Such a person becomes a yearned for blessing.

The *riika* system among the Agĩkũyũ acts as cultural vehicle. It is a tool for social control that also provides manpower for public duties. That is why undermining the *riika* standards through evil attitudes, misconduct, malevolent mentality and contempt is believed to attract a serious curse. Clans and age groups act as custodians of moral uprightness, cultural values and religiosity. The guiding philosophy is that one does not lose the age grade or the clan right. Within this philosophy then, to be culpably ex-communicated from ones' *riika* or *nyũmba* triggers an overwhelming traumatic curse.

At this point, it is useful to point out that the Agĩkũyũ have a pluriformity of curses and are still conservative with regard to curses and cursing even in our contemporary society. This is a phenomenon which even mainstream churches have not managed to annihilate or "propitiate".

Categories of Curses and Cursing Among the Agĩkũyũ

The following are among the main categories of curses Among the Agĩkũyũ

- The curse of refusal to forgive.
- Smith clan curse.
- African mothers' curse-worse and most feared.
- Proverbial insights into curses.
- A father's curse using his penis and urine.
- Inherited curses.
- The cursed number: number seven (7).
- The curse of *kũrĩkia ũthoni o rĩmwe* (accomplishing dowry all at once).
- The curse of ruining the environment-especially sacred tree.

Below we provide a briefly elaboration of these curses.

1. The Curse of Refusal to Forgive

This is a hidden occult mode of curse. One curses and adamantly refuses to revoke it from within one's mind and heart. S/he cares not a straw whether the community rebukes him/her or not in persuasion to recant one's range of anger. Such an ill will to the victim who, willingly or unwillingly, inflicts a wound or injustice upon the curse agent.

2. Smith Clan Curse

People belonging to the smith clan are highly respected among the Agĩkũyũ. The high repute accorded to them is mainly because of their critical and invaluable expertise as well as artistic profession in iron mongering. Their curse, nevertheless, is greatly feared. Even the *nema kũhĩa* (dare devils) do not easily relate or associate too closely with this category of people. To many people, the smith clan curse is the worst and most feared. Jomo Kenyatta, observes that:

The smith clan holds an important position in the community; members of that clan are respected and feared. In the first place they command respect because of their skills in ironwork, without which the community would have difficulty in obtaining the necessary implements for various activities, for iron implements play an important part in the economic, religious, social and political life of the Agĩkũyũ. In the second place, the smiths are feared for the fact that strong curses rest with the smith clan (Kenyatta, 1938:75-76).

It is important to note that even such an awesome curse is revocable. The requisite is that the cursed person sincerely transforms and thoroughly expresses adequate willingness to be forgiven. The victim has to manifest adequate yearning for proper restitution and acceptable restoration into genuine family relationship within the community. Another requisite is that one has to manifest openness to reparation thus effecting demanded restitution.

3. African Mother's Curse: Worst and Most Feared.

From available data, it is not true that smith clan family curse is the worst and most feared.

To appreciate the depth, gravity and seriousness of an African mother's curse, one has to understand the nature of an African mother's love for her children, including respective husbands who are actually overgrown children in relation to mothers, so deeply and unconditionally.

Such untold amount of mothers' tender loving care unconditionally demands a lot of reciprocity. And the mothers themselves know this. No wonder they do all they can to try and avoid losing themselves owing to the serious repercussions thereby.

The above reasonably profound background insights into African mothers, motherliness and philosophy of motherhood are adequate justifications and, indeed, rationale for this assertion, namely: that mother's curses are most feared and have most serious repercussions than even those of the smith clan. It does not matter whether they are Agikũyũ mothers, Akamba mothers, Lyhya mothers, Kuria mothers, Aembu mothers, Maasai mothers, Taita mothers, Ameru mothers or any other mother for that matter. The underlying principle with regard to mothers seems to be virtually cross culturally the same.

Again from our research, it is the African mother's curse that is the worst and most feared as well as extremely terrifying even among the smith clan members too. They are thus more awesome than that of the smith clan. A mother's curse is overwhelming, extremely humbling, uncomfortably humiliating and oftentimes shameful.

Of immense importance is the mention of the very anatomy of the mothers which, among the Africans, is a serious taboo issue, ill-willed language of bad omen: the very mention of terms like mother's private part, breasts, womb, pubic hairs, the very act of sexual intercourse...and by the mothers themselves is despicable among the Africans.

Among the most dreadful mothers' curses include:

- 1) Mother's Curse Using Her Private part.
- 2) Mother's Curse Using Her Pubic Hairs.

- 3) Mother's Curse Using Her Breasts.
- 4) Mother's Curse of Breaking a Pot Full of Food.

Proverbial Insights into Curses

Among Africans, proverbs are extremely important. They are perceived to be highly pedagogical especially on the issue of blessing and cursing: "The proverbs are the quintessence of Gĩkũyũ eloquence, and represented for centuries the code of tribal laws used for lack of written books. They are full of wisdom and embody the maxims of natural law 'written by God in the heart of all' ...they are...a precious inheritance, which must not be lost in the changes now taking place" (Barra, G. 1960: iii).

Moreover, "the handing down of proverbs from one generation to another orally is a tribal custom closely linked to the education of the youth and to the social interchange of conversation... (Njũrũri, N.1983: iv)." Consequently, "children are traditionally brought up on proverbs which are significantly directed to them for their instruction and which are casually around them in daily conversation...proverbs form a comprehensive code of law and morals which has not been obliterated or changed by the impact of Western culture. Anyone who learns the lessons they give will acquire the wisdom they contain (.Njũrũri, N.1983: iv)"

Gerald Wanjohi (1997:38) points out that in a very clear way, proverbs point to the basic philosophy: to a metaphysics, to an epistemology and to the ethics of the Agĩkũyũ, as well as that of education, of religion, of society, and political philosophy.

Proverbs are first and foremost control measure for *kwĩgigima maĩndũ me magigi* (to fear and be wary of evil). Hence the proverb: *Mũndũ ũtarĩ kĩndũ etigĩrĩte ti mũndũ* (one who fears nothing is not a person). Actually, for an African, not to fear anything is a curse. It is in this light that there are African proverbs curved out of curses and cursing. Among them are:

Kĩrumi kĩa ũrĩ muoyo gĩkĩrĩte kĩa ũrĩ irima (an earthly living person's curse is more efficacious than that of the departed ones)

Not only is such a curse taken to have a more effective impact. It is also believed to be more lethal. Thus the utterance of a curse by terrestrial person is said to have a more disastrous effect upon the offender than a curse pronounced by a celestial person. That of the earthly person is said to be worse than the one uttered by a departed person.

During the research, what came out clearly is the fact that when it comes to revoking the curse, that of the departed is, nevertheless, more serious and more complex. The reasons supplied ranged from the fact that access to such offended one requires complicated and delegated rituals, and mediated propitiatory rites. In case of the living one, the repentant offenders have more ease

in seeking mundane or terrestrial intermediaries, forgiveness and propitiatory reconcilers on demand. There is also a more direct encounter and re-incorporation with the curse agent who is more accessible for expressing and directly witnessing such conversion, sorrow, amendment, restitution and re-incorporation.

Kĩrumi gĩtinyuagwo ta ũcũrũ. Mũgambo wa mũndũ ũrakua ndwĩrigithagio (A curse is not drunk a curse like porridge. The last will of a dying person is not undermined)

The implication here is that curses, unlike enjoying a bowl of porridge, are painfully demanding. It also indicates the seriousness of a departed person's last will which is double-pronged i.e., it is a blessing and a curse at the same time. The solemn words of a dying person are not taken lightly. Such a person's *mũgambo* (solemn last words) is not to be taken for granted: When adhered to, one acquires blessings; when ignored or taken with contempt one provokes a terrible existential curse.

Kĩrumi gĩa Ũtũrĩka Gĩtinyitaga Mũndũ (an uncalled for or unprovoked malicious curse is ineffective).

This proverb cautions that a far-fetched and unjust "curse" imbued with vendetta intent is null and void. Thus a genuine curse is not to be pronounced out of malice or uncalled for emotional outbursts or jealous rage. This proverb acts as a control measure against curses that are pronounced out of unfair grudges or brutal mischievous attitudes.

A Father's Curse Using His Penis and Urine

This is a very serious and weighty curse. For a father to expose his *gĩthita* (penis) is unbelievable! To do this to own people is unspeakable. It is a terrible act especially among the Agĩkũyũ who do not even imagine that their parents actually conjugate or are capable of enjoying sex. Such a curse is uttered and done as a result of grave matters or a serious disrespect. It is triggered by overwhelming offending issues like a son raping his father's wife or wives. It is also triggered by extremely shameful deeds like that of a grown up daughter grabbing or deliberately touching her father's *mũcuthi* (penis) in a confrontation.

Inherited Curses

These category of curses run across generations being transmitted from the fore parents who are said to have done something seriously wrong or ignored with contempt some cultural or traditional taboos or norms of morality or family ethics or ancestral solidarity.

Arguably, the victim members can do nothing about it. Neither can the aforesaid curses be eradicated. The rationale is that, such curses are not acquired but are inborn. Perhaps, the curse victims are predestined to be so cursed and (innocently) suffer the consequences. It is possible that the victims may be individually or personally not culpable, nevertheless, they are compelled to live with and die in such curses².

Having said this, below we consider just two examples of inherited curses namely:

Women with the Curse of “Red Thighs” (*Ciero Ndune*)

Traditionally and derogatively, they are called *aka a ciero ndune* (women with red thighs). These are women whose husbands gradually but usually die, one after the other, after cohabiting with the woman within short periods of their marriage. Such women are believed to be of misfortune and, indeed, a curse to men hence whoever marries her falls victim to the curse. On discovering red thighs on women, men run away despite, in some cases, getting babies with them. Other men also avoid them to avoid *mbĩrĩra* (grave yards). Such women have “anathematised” treatment meted upon them. The same is extended to their daughters who are also feared to genetically inherit the abominable trait and are thus virtually subjected to the above misfortune.

Man with the Curse of Abomination: Bad Omen Carriers

The research revealed that this is the curse of men allegedly “condemned” by society for being bad omen carriers. The characteristics and qualities of such men emerge quite early in their youthful stage. These include: Being “evil-eyed” such that a mere gaze at somebody’s baby “makes” that baby sick or even die; while making love via heterosexual intercourse his penis gets stuck in the private part, like that of mating dogs, causing enormous pain and embarrassment. Occasionally, when they crack *itherũ ihunyũku* (an ill-informed joke), it turns out to be so. Their utterances are anger to people. The curse is a burden in life. But more significant is the belief that they are “pre-determined” to die with the misfortune.

The Curse of the Cursed Number Seven

It is not by coincidence or spontaneity that I document the above category of curse as the seventh item in my brief analyses of the types of curses. It is a deliberate option. The rationale is that number seven is a most controversial phobia-generating “unfortunate” number. It is a number which is also highly ambiguous in diverse ethnic groups and races.

The signification of symbols and numbers tend to have a universal application. Nevertheless, one has to be extremely cautious of generalisation aimed at a globalised unison or harmonisation. It is wrong to force a community to blindly copy the world-view of another community on the authority of that other community. Even in areas where respective communities are in agreement, nevertheless, the selection, accentuation and integration of other communities’ cultural trait differs from one ethnic group to another and from one race to another.

As such, to the Jews/Israelites/Hebrews- for instance- seven is a whole complete number. It signifies fullness. For them, this number is saturated with perpetual-ness and blessings. This is the rationale underlying the great symbolic significance of their seven candles’ stand called *minorah*. It is also the justification behind Simon Peter’s seven times forgiving question and Jesus’ related response as follows: “Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the Church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven” (Mt 18:21-22).

The issue here is that among the Jews, seven is a blessed number while for others like the Agĩkũyũ it is a cursed number.

The Curse of “*Kūrĩkia Ũthoni Oro Rĩmwe*” (accomplishing dowry all at once)

According to the Agĩkũyũ culture and tradition, payment of dowry is not a one day matter. It spells doom for the newly married and consequently a curse to the respective families’ amicable healthy dynamism and conviviality. This is the principle behind the proverb- “*Ũthoni ũkũhingio o rĩmwe ti mwega*” (accomplishing dowry at a go is not good).

The underlying rationale is that marriage among the Agĩkũyũ is perceived as a life-time human and social process. It does not matter that the married lady becomes a *cũcũ* (grandmother). Still her parents will legitimately keep demanding constant dowry bit by bit. Our research shows that this is the practice among many other African communities. The aim is to conserving the matrimonial family as the basis of societal wellbeing. If paid at once, dowry would be formal compensation that would have a price tag and once paid in full, the social ties between the two families would cease. When the ritual is ongoing, it keeps creating occasions for more respective families’ interactions thereby enhancing communal solidarity and conviviality.

The concept of *ũthoni* (dowry and matrimonial relations) is thus deeply entrenched in the Agĩkũyũ way of life. It is highly communitarian and, unless abused, it ensures healthy

interpersonal relationships and guarantees family unity, harmonious living and mutual support. It represents a philosophy of a growing vitality cum communal interpersonal relationship. That is why it is a curse to block this process from taking its course by “accomplishing” it at a go.

The Curse of Ruining the Environment-Especially Sacred Trees

The Agĩkũyũ, like many other ethnic groups, have an inborn respect and existential veneration of *Ngai's* (God's) creation whose destruction inflicts curses upon the culprits. Whatever interferes with the ecology³ is a curse to the community. They believe that ruining nature results in the curse of environmental crisis (Gitau,2011:308-330) which is detrimental to all.

They have great reverence and sincere humility for *magongona* (sacrifices) which are done under very special environment, the *Mũgumo* (*ficus nataliensis*) tree deemed to be prominent and a major source of blessings. In the Agĩkũyũ land, *Mũgumo* is the highest and most aesthetic of all the trees. It was specially identified as the “Holy Alter” for sacrifices rendered to God in worship. To destroy it, therefore, amounts to incurring a terrible curse. There are other trees used for home sacrifices, offerings, prayers and ritualistic affairs but they are less prestigious than the *Mũgumo*. They are, nevertheless, venerated also for socio-religious and ecological purposes. These include among others; *Mũrurĩ* (*trichilia ametica*), *Ithare* (*dracaena* spices), closely associated with *Mũgumo*, *Mũthakwa* (*crassocethalum manii*), *Mũkenia* (*Lithia* sp.) whose leaves are used for blessing children, *Mũrerema* whose leaves are used for purposes of circumcision, *Mũmbũ*, *Mũkerenju*, *Mũringa*, *Mũũ*, *Mwemba igũrũ*, *Mũkuri*, *Mũtare*, *Kĩrago*, *Mũkeu* and *Mũgere*.

Other environmental icons used for home sacrifices and offerings and related blessing rituals are mountains. The main ones include: Kĩrĩ-Nyaga (Bright-Spotted Mountain, i.e. Mt Kenya), Kĩa-Njahĩ (the Bean Mountain, i.e., Mt Kilimambogo), Kĩa-mbirũrũ (the Blue-Blak Mountain ,i.e., Ngong Hills) and Kĩa-Nyandarũa (Kinangop or Abadares). All these and their surroundings are gratefully respected. It is a curse to deliberately ruin them and the environment.

Findings, Recommendations and Conclusion

At this point, one is able to draw out invaluable findings and implications of the article eventually coming up with a general conclusion. The findings and recommendations are as follows:

Findings

1. That a curse is not an end in itself. It is in a way an affirmation of blessings. It is a pointer or a challenge, inspiring someone to both the restoration and re-establishment of blessings. This, as profoundly explained, is thanks to the African philosophy of perceiving curses positively as invaluable entities.
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2. That refusal to be forgiven accompanied by denial of sin is, from the insights derived from the article, the gravest curse one can inflict upon oneself. It is a sure way of running away from blessings towards a cursed life and living which can, perhaps, be analogically likened to what Jesus Christ called “sin against the Holy Spirit”. As we saw, a cursed person alienates oneself and is verily estranged from the community.
3. That while we pity the cursed, we should also be merciful to those who utter curses since occasionally curses backfire more so to the unforgiving. That is why it is wise to forgive unconditionally, unreservedly and prudently so as to wipe out the burden of ill feelings basing ourselves on the Our father prayer principle (Mt 6:7-13; Lk 11:1-4) which challenges us to forgive as we too are in need of forgiveness from others.

Recommendations

1. There is need to emancipating ourselves from being unreasonably haunted with curses or being bogged down with the yoke of mothers’ or even ancestral curses in our respective kinships. This is thanks to our findings that curses are revocable. That even if those who are rightly or wrongly, cursed and are no longer living our kind of life so as to be approached to revoke the curses, nevertheless, there are mediators and intermediaries empowered to revoke curses.
2. We should be awake to the that living with a curse amounts to existing in radical crisis and acute restlessness like is the case with the cursed Cain (Geneses 4:1ff.) – a narrative that appeals greatly to African pro-life and taboo philosophy. For an African, especially, this is hell on earth. Hence the urgency in: Making an effort to own up the wrong doing and confess the evil; Seek forgiveness and reconciliation; and, earnestly, render restitution for amendment.
3. It should, moreover, be remembered that curses do have shortcomings as the article clearly exposed. Among the disclosed limitations are psychosomatic, sometimes spiritual negative implications. These are, to mention but a few:
 - a. Low esteem
 - b. Sense of helplessness subjected to the cursed
 - c. Unhealthy sense uselessness unloved, unvalued, and hated
 - d. Dangerous mixture between customary cum traditional repugnant and, indeed, erroneous existential elements and characteristics that are incompatible with Christianity

Conclusion

With the above inspirations from the article, all are called to help others to refrain from curses by minimising what provokes curses, learn from curses and always be aware that all curses- including the dreaded mother's curse- are revocable as long as one is properly disposed for conversion, repentance, reparation and restoration into the community. The above are adequate verifications that curses and cursing are imbued with invaluable socio-cultural and religious benefits.

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