

Conversion or Proselytization? Being Maasai, Becoming Christian¹

Joshua Robert Barron

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2021

Abstract

Conversion is part of Christianity's DNA. Scholarly discussions about the meaning(s) and nature of Christian conversion perhaps reflect a popular—and historical—confusion about conversion vis-à-vis proselytization (e.g., Goodman 1994; Cornelli 2017, 413). Nonetheless, proselytization and conversion are not the same. Culture plays an important role in proper Christian conversion because this conversion, or “the turning to Christ what is already there” in the words of Andrew Walls, takes place within the context of culture. By contrast proselytization is the mere exchange of one human culture for another and was rejected by the Apostles. Because “the gospel enriches the culture,” in African contexts “Christianity should strengthen and reaffirm one's African identity” (Falconer 2015, 161). After exploring these themes, I will propose a model to discuss Christian conversion within the Maa language and culture of the Maasai people of East Africa.

Key Words: contextualization, conversion, Maasai Christianity, proselytization

Introduction

Scholars typically use the term “‘conversion’ to describe changes in ‘established customs’ or ‘religion’” (Kling 2020, 588). By ‘conversion’ some mean a change of affiliation or of institutional membership, and others mean a change of conviction (Ikenga-Metuh 1987, 19). Indisputably, “conversion establishes new boundaries” (Rambo and Farhadian 2014, 2). Outside of the academy, the term ‘conversion’ is often used as mere “‘theological slang’ for when a person decides to become a Christian” (Hull 2016, 20), Muslim, or some other religious affiliation. But what does ‘become a Christian’ mean? For many, it means abandoning one's own culture and becoming, essentially, a foreigner. But that is the path of proselytization, not of conversion. Eugene Hillman, a former Spiritan missionary among the Maasai, offers a pertinent warning: “In so far as one preaches the gospel as it has been developed within one's own culture, one is preaching not only the gospel but one's own culture. In so far as one is preaching one's own culture, one is asking others not only to accept the gospel but also to renounce their own culture and accept one's own” (Hillman 1993, 7).

Renunciation of one's own culture in order to adopt another culture is the very definition of proselytization, as “proselytes take on the cultural forms of the tradition they join” (Burrows 2011, 107). We should note from the beginning the biblical distinction between the two models: *epistrofē* (ἐπιστροφή) expresses the idea of conversion whereas *prosēlūtisē* (προσηλύτιση) means proselytization. The Council of Jerusalem determined once and for all that “the followers of Jesus are not proselytes. They are converts” (Walls 2004, 5). In the Maa language of the Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania, the equivalent quotation is *ime ilasujak le Yesu ilmeek. Ilooyelieki e ilata ninche*. As the Maa language does not distinguish between “proselytes” and “converts” terminologically, however, I could not translate Walls's observation literally. Instead, I have used *ilmeek* (“despised foreigners”) and *ilooyelieki e ilata* (“anointed adoptees,” literally “those who are anointed with oil”), for reasons I will explain below.

Christian conversion can be defined as “a turning to God in Christ” (Kling 2014, 607). Specifically, Christian conversion is the process of “taking what is already there and turning it to Christ” (Walls 2018; cf. Walls 2012):

Converts have to be constantly, relentlessly turning their ways of thinking, their education and training, their ways of working and doing things, toward Christ. They must think Christ into the patterns of thought they have inherited, into their networks of relationship and their processes for making decisions (Walls 2004, 6; see also Asamoah-Gyadu 2011, 99).

In Christian conversion, “people receive the names, the identity, the mission, the privilege, of Israel; yet they preserve the ethnic and cultural identity that is theirs by creation” (Wright 2004, 15). According to Clement of Alexandria, all Christians, regardless of their ethnicity (*ethnos*), come together to form a new nation (*genos*) composed of the saved people (*laos*) (Buell 2005, 139). Yet they bring with them their ethnicities and cultures in all their diversity. Thus the poetry of Revelation 7:9 beholds “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation [*ethnos*], tribe [*phulē*], people [*laos*] and language [*glossa*], standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (NIV1984).

Proselytization and Conversion in Christian History

When the choice between conversion or proselytization was raised in the early days of the Church, the Jerusalem Council ruled decisively that one enters the Church by converting to Christ rather than by proselytizing to Jewish culture and ethnicity. Andrew F. Walls observes that

cultural diversity was built into the church within the New Testament period. This was an inevitable result of the early decision not to require circumcision and obedience to the Torah for Gentiles who came to faith in Jesus. In making this decision, the early church abandoned the long-standing proselyte model by which Gentiles were incorporated into Israel by assuming Jewish religious culture (Walls 2010, 18).

In line with that decision, Pope Gregory the Great (bishop of Rome from 590 to 604) declared that the missionary “Augustine [of Canterbury] should not simply import current Roman liturgical practices” and impose them upon the English (O’Sullivan 2016, 60). But proselytizing has been the practice at other times. During the Spanish Inquisition, it was not enough for Moors to stop being Muslim: they had to stop being Moorish as well. Likewise, Jewish converts were expected to stop being ethnically and culturally Jewish in order to become Christian (e.g., see Fernández-Armesto 2009, 33).

This issue was again raised during the later debate over Jesuit efforts to convert Chinese and Indians to Christ within their respective cultures, avoiding proselytization to European culture. Ultimately Pope Benedict XIV (pontiff from 1740 to 1758) ruled against such efforts of inculturation, essentially contravening the decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15: “Where the Judaizers had failed the Europeanizers triumphed” (Hillman 1993, 36–39). Specifically considering attempts, failures, and possibilities of inculturation of the gospel for the Maasai, Hillman also speaks of the “congenital and chronic foreignness” of the [Roman Catholic] “church in Africa” (Hillman 1993, 44). Insofar as the spirit of Benedict’s ruling is not vigorously rejected, the Church in Africa cannot help but be a “*Wazungu* Religion” (i.e., a religion of foreigners; on the Swahili term *wazungu*, see below).

The Protestant modern missionary movement as well has not been immune to this difficulty. Christian missionaries often consciously thought of Christian conversion in terms

which unmistakably describe proselytization. Discussing the factors involved in the spread of Christianity in East Africa, Neal Sobania strikingly uses the terms ‘conversion’ and ‘proselytization’ synonymously (2003, 47–48; see also Hoehler-Fatton 1996, 89, 179). New Christians were simply to stop being what they were in order to become someone completely different. In the 1800s in Southern Africa, conversions to Christianity were rare and “implied a transition to the European way of life” (Denis 2016, 254). For Virginia Blakeslee, an African Inland Mission missionary among the *Agĩkũyũ* in Kenya in the mid-1900s, an African must leave behind African ways and culture in order to convert to Christianity. The *Agĩkũyũ* are a Bantu ethnic group; properly speaking, ‘*Agĩkũyũ*’ refers to the ethnic group and ‘*Gĩgĩkũyũ*’ to their language; in popular English usage ‘*Kikuyu*’ often refers to both. An *Agĩkũyũ* convert to Christianity had to decide to “leave the paths of the *Agĩkũyũ* to take the path of God” (Kinoti 2010, 53–54). It is no wonder that Kenyan scholar E. S. Antieno-Odiambo complains that “missionaries felt it right that the African must receive the Western culture with his Christianity” (Strayer 2015, 19). Tragically, it has been all too common for missionaries to practice proselytization instead of seeking conversion, even while using the language of “conversion” and “converts”:

... early Pentecostal missionaries ... [often] were insensitive to the indigenous cultures among which they worked ... [They thus] brought with them not just the gospel from the West, but also in many instances believed and then imposed their Western version of the gospel on those being evangelized.... The supremacy of the gospel was translated also to mean the supremacy of Western (Euro-American) culture. [Thus] converts were socialized into rejecting their cultural heritage: this was presented as the essential meaning of Christian conversion (Yong 2010, 45).

Such efforts of proselytization rather than conversion result in “the transformation of Christians into replicas of the white man” (Thomas 2001, 211). This confusion of culture with Christianity has been as common (ref. Taber 1991) as it is a rank betrayal of the heart of the gospel. It has resulted in the characterization of Christianity as a “*Wazungu* Religion” by many East Africans (among Christians and non-Christians alike) or, in the words of Maasai Christian theologian Godwin Lekundayo of Tanzania, “as something alien which has been imposed upon them” (Lekundayo 2013, 2).

Mzungu (*Wazungu* is the plural) is the *kiSwahili* term for ‘white people’. While *mzungu* denotes someone of light complexion generally, it connotes ‘foreigner’. The common sense of *wazungu* is “(light-skinned) people with a different language and an incomprehensibly strange culture”; in some cases, *mzungu* can be a racial slur. To claim that Christianity is a “*Wazungu* Religion” is to imply it is impossible to become Christian while remaining African: if you become a Christian, *ipso facto*, you lose your Africanity.²

African scholars such as Kwame Bediako and Lamin Sanneh have made a compelling case that Christianity is inherently not “a western religion” (Bediako 1992; 1995; Sanneh 2003). Thomas C. Oden has insisted on acknowledging the debt of Western Christianity to ancient African Christianity (Oden 2007; 2011). Andrew F. Walls has persistently and cogently argued that Christianity as European Christendom (and thus inherently as territorially and culturally Western) was historically a brief aberration which has now passed, as “Christendom is dead, and Christianity is alive and well without it” (Walls 2016, 691).

Nonetheless, feelings against Christianity as explicitly Western remain strong. South African theologian Tinyiko Samuel Maluleke contends against Bediako that “Africans must first cease to experience Christianity as alienating and foreign before they can start discussing Christianity as non-foreign and non-Western” (van der Merwe 2016, 570).³ Yet “Christianity

has always been, in principle, global; this is not just a phenomenon of the twentieth century. It is clear that the few centuries when Christianity was overwhelmingly Western actually represented an exception” (Walls 2017, 71).

Vincent Donovan and Conversion Among the Maasai

The labeling of Christianity as a “*Wazungu* Religion” is in fact an issue of conflating conversion with proselytization. The long-observed resistance of the Maasai people to the gospel (e.g., see Neckebrouck 1993) may well have more to do with a resistance to misguided attempts at proselytization than to the gospel itself. It should also be noted that the Maasai have been more resistant to all Western cultural influences (Rigby 1989). Neckebrouck notes that in order for a people resistant to the gospel to be drawn to the gospel, finding it attractive, it is first necessary for Christians to loose themselves from whatever causes Christianity to be considered “*une religion importée*” (“an imported religion”; Neckebrouck 2002, 7), a phrase analogous to “*wazungu* religion.” He continues by observing that Roman Catholic missionaries were more tolerant than their Protestant colleagues of important parts of Maa culture and had as well the distinct advantage of a looser connection with civil authorities (Neckebrouck 2002, 8); the British and German colonial powers in East Africa were, of course, nominally Protestant.

In this vein, Vincent J. Donovan’s 1978 *Christianity Rediscovered* has been celebrated as a missiological triumph, as the right way to deal with issues of culture and conversion while avoiding proselytization. Donovan served with the Spiritans, a Roman Catholic missionary order, among the Maasai in Tanzania for 17 years. Unable to see any “common ground with the Masai [*sic*]” (Donovan 1978, 15) yet embracing a cultural sensitivity, he came to the realization “that God enables a people, any people, to reach salvation through their culture and tribal ... customs and traditions” and that “an evangelist [or] missionary must respect the culture of a people, not destroy it” (Donovan 1982, 30). Here Donovan was following the tradition of the Spiritan missionary François-Marie-Paul Libermann (1802-1852; née Jacob Libbermann), who instructed the missionaries under his direction: “You are not going to Africa in order to establish there Italy or France or any such country. Dispense with Europe, its customs and spirit. Make yourselves Negroes with the Negroes. Then you will understand them as they must be understood. Our holy religion has invariably to be established in the soil” (Sundkler and Steed 2004, 103).

Donovan’s missiological theory is both sound and commendable, but his work should be taken with a grain of salt. While I never met him personally, I have reason to doubt his grasp of Maa language and culture.⁴ Moreover, whatever the value of his theory may be, the fruit of his efforts is more difficult to see. Later visitors to the areas in which he labored found that churches he had strived to plant had primarily withered on the vine (see, e.g., Priest 1990, 13). As Neckebrouck concluded, the Catholic efforts of evangelization among the Maasai—in spite of initially healthier approaches—have not been more successful than those of Protestant missionaries (Neckebrouck 2002, 8). Perhaps extra-biblical Roman Catholic dogma—especially the insistence on clerical celibacy (even though this violates the canons of the Council of Nicaea in 325)—makes Roman Catholicism more inimical to Maa culture. Indeed, Maasai have increasingly embraced evangelical forms of Christianity in their thousands, although discussing why is well beyond the scope of this article.

Conversion in Maasai culture

In spite of many analysts’ pessimism about Maasai acceptance of the gospel, the truth of Christianity apparently enables an increasing number of Maasai to make better sense of the world, at least judging by the numbers of those turning to Christ. If the exposition of the gospel

to the Maasai does not move into the intellectual sphere of the Maasai people, huge areas of their thought life will remain untouched and thus unconverted. But when the proselytizing model of missions is replaced with the conversionary model, Maasai can experience the “turning of what is already there to Christ” in their social life, family life, and intellectual life (Walls 2018). In this conversion, some new things will be embraced by Maasai Christians, some traditional practices (such as institutionalized sexual immorality) will be rejected, and everything else will be turned to Christ. Because a non-proselytizing “encounter between the Maasai and the Bible provides conceptual tools for strengthening not only [Maasai culture] but also African culture and identity more generally” (Nkesala 2020, 194), Maasai Christians will be enabled to translate “biblical truth into [the] vernacular categories and worldview” (Shaw 2010, 167) of the broader Maa culture. When the interactive process of this translation takes place, both the real change that results from conversion to Christ and authentic continuity with Maa culture and traditions are readily seen.

The key terms in OT Hebrew and NT Greek related to conversion denote the actions of turning or changing. The primary words in Maa for both “turn” and “change” are *aibelekeny* (the verb) and *enkibelekenyata* (the noun). These terms convey the ideas of *change, translation, conversion, proselytization, transformation, and corner*. Such a plethora of non-Maa-linguistic meanings of Maa terms makes Bible translation challenging, whether into or from Maa. *Aibelekeny* is the probable choice for translating an entire semantic domain of New Testament Greek verbs, as is *enkibelekenyata* for a range of Greek nouns.⁵ Interestingly, the first edition of the Maa Bible (BSM1991)⁶ does not directly translate the Greek terms μετανοέω (*metanoēō*; etymologically “to transform the mind” and traditionally rendered as “repent” in English) or μετάνοια (*metanoia*; “transformation of the mind” but typically translated as “repentance”). Instead, the Maa Bible typically translates the English terms *repent/repentance* as *airridu* (the verb) and *enkirridunoto* (the noun), which refer to feelings of remorse or contrition for wrong-doing and have nothing to do with the ideas of either *changing* or *turning*. In Acts 2:38, Peter is calling his listeners to *metanoia*, a radical and conversionary change. But instead of an imperative to change, the Maa translation here just commands the people “*erridutu*,” which translates into English as “be remorseful” or even just as “feel bad.” Such feelings may be fitting, but the choice of the imperative *erridutu* (from *airridu*) points more to the etymological history of “repent” in English (i.e., the idea of repeated acts of penance in Roman Catholic piety) rather than to the key meanings of the biblical terms for turning, changing direction, and transformed thinking.

Despite the lexical difficulty in distinguishing between conversion and proselytization, Maasai culture may help to differentiate between the two concepts. Indeed, though the Maa language may lack a specific term for ‘proselytization’, the Maasai themselves understand the concept. Most of the *Yaaku* or *Mukogodo* people of Kenya, whose language belonged to the Cushitic family, have been assimilated into Maa culture and language; those who assimilated are known as the *Dorobo Maasai* (Cronk 2002; 2004). An outsider will not be able to tell the difference between a Dorobo and an ethnic Maasai (e.g., from the Purko or Iloodokilani subtribes); the Dorobo have ‘proselytized’ themselves and completely assimilated. At the same time, the Maasai have another cultural practice which may provide a model for understanding Christian ‘conversion’ within Maa culture: cross-tribal adoption.

Many cultures practice forms of adoption. The Maasai practice adoption of children: a child will be given to a couple that has not been able to conceive (ref. Talle 2004). More important for a model of Christian ‘conversion’ is the Maasai rite of cross-cultural adoption, in which a captive, a refugee, an economic migrant, or a non-Maasai spouse can be adopted into the Maasai people. The Maa phrase for this adoption into the Maasai people is *enkiyieleta e mperere*,

literally “the anointing of the spear” (Mol 1996, s.v. *enkiyieleta*; also see Waller 1993; Talle 2004; Lamphear 1993). The adoption ceremony includes the initiate being “reborn,” which is symbolized or acted out by his or her head being shaved and the initiate being anointed or smeared with oil or fat. When such a person is adopted, the adoptee is no longer considered to be their former non-Maasai identity, e.g., Agĩkũyũ, but is now fully considered Maasai, and is assigned a clan and other central traits.

The potential of using *enkiyieleta e mpere* (or similar words) as Christian terminology, should the adoption practice and ceremony be turned to Christ, should be obvious. The language could describe both the initiatory rite of baptism in Christianity and the ancient accompanying ritual ‘chrismation’. (In churches which are part of the old Greek, Syriac, and Coptic traditions, chrismation is the ritual anointing of the newly baptized with oil as a sacramental sealing of the gift of the Holy Spirit; in Western Churches this practice largely has been either replaced by the rite of confirmation or else forgotten entirely.) In this cross-cultural adoption into the Maasai people, the adoptee experiences a “new birth” and can be called first *oloyela* (“the one about to be anointed”; plural *ilooyela*) and then *oloyelieki* (“the anointed one”; plural *ilooyeliek*; alternative forms are *oloyelaki* for the singular / *ilooyelaki* for the plural),⁷ just as Jesus can be called *Oloyelieki le nkAi* (“the Anointed one of God”).

The Maa language distinguishes one’s degree of belonging or of foreignness:

- olmaasani (ilmaasai)* Maasai person(s)
- oyati (iyat)* resident alien(s), migrant(s)
(in some contexts *oyati* can mean
‘orphan’ or ‘unloved child’)
- olmeeki* or *ormeeki (ilmeek* or *irmeek)* despised foreigner(s)

(*Olmeeki* and *ormeeki* are dialectical variations of the same term; *ilmeek* and *irmeek* are the plural forms, respectively. In the quotations below, the forms used are those used by those cited.) *Olmeeki* does not just indicate a foreigner but is a derogatory slur, a term of contempt. For example, in Maasai culture, one who commits homicide is subject to penal justice, but if the victim were an *olmeeki*, traditional Maasai justice does not consider a crime to have been committed—the *olmeeki* is little valued. In traditional Maasai thought, “murder” applies only to the slaying of an *olmaasani*; killing a non-Maasai is traditionally considered only “homicide” at most. But for killing an *olmeeki*, whether accidentally or with malice aforethought, the *olmaasani* would not even be required to pay a fine.

An *oyati* or even a despised *olmeeki* may, as an anointed adoptee, be granted the full status of an *olmaasani*. Suppose an *oyati* has been living among the Maasai. He probably already has received a Maasai name like Lemayian in addition to his birthname. If he undergoes the “anointing of the spear” ritual, Maasai will say, “Lemayian has become *olmaasani* now. Before, he was only a foreigner. But now he is *olmaasani* together with us!” This cross-cultural adoption is an excellent analogy for the nature of Christian conversion, in which we who were once “not a people” have been adopted as sons and daughters, becoming the very people of God (Romans 9:25; Ephesians 1:5; 1 Peter 2:10).

On the other hand, proselytization means that the proselyte stops being what he or she was, not only in terms of status but in culture as well. Thus the Dorobo, or more properly their ancestors, were proselytes. But suppose an Agĩkũyũ man named Mugo is adopted as a Maasai through “the anointing of the spear.” Mugo thenceforth will be fully recognized as *olmaasani* among the Maasai. Should Mugo visit his home Agĩkũyũ village, he would be recognized as a

Maasai-ized Agĩkũyũ, but not as a foreigner. He would be still recognizable as Mugo. But when an *olmaasani* has had to become a proselyte to become a Christian, effectively becoming a Black European rather than a Maasai Christian, the Maasai have told him “you have become *olmeeki* to us!”⁸

Thus when Maasai *proselytize* to European Christianity or even adopt Swahili culture, they have been traditionally ostracized as no longer *olmaasani* but *olmeeki* or *ormeeki*. Dorothy L. Hodgson narrates historical examples of Maasai who have become *ormeeki* (Hodgson 2011, 63–64, 250–258). She observes that Maasai explicitly mark “*irmeek* as profoundly not-Maasai” (Hodgson 2011, 258). Where traditional Maasai have scorned Maasai Christians as *ilmeek*, I propose that proselytization has been at fault. Missionaries and other Westerners by and large insisted upon the adoption of Western culture by Maasai “converts.” Interestingly, however, this adoption of Western culture has been largely unenforceable for Maasai women. Hodgson also notes that feminine forms—*emeeki* and *imeek*—are relatively rare (Hodgson 2011, 253). It seems the majority of Maasai women converts to Christianity were *converts*, not proselytes. They continued to wear traditional clothing rather than adopting Western attire and continued to function culturally as Maasai.

When a non-Maasai first becomes *oloyela* (“the one about to be anointed,” as noted earlier) and then undergoes the *enkiyieleta e mpere* (“the anointing of the spear”) ceremony to become *oloyelaki* or *oloyelieki* (“the anointed one”), he experiences a good deal of authentic *enkibelekenyata* (“change”): receiving membership within a clan, the name of the lineage into which he has been adopted, the acceptance of certain Maa cultural norms. The *oloyelaki* is also given livestock. But unlike the proselytization of the Dorobo, becoming an *oloyelaki* seems to be a conversionary change, similar to the changes involved in Maasai marriage. When an *esiankiki* (“bride”) is married, she receives a new name and joins a new lineage. In order for her to have an opportunity to learn the customs of her new family, she and her husband will at first live in her mother-in-law’s home. She will have to learn to do things her mother-in-law’s way instead of her mother’s way. But she does not stop being who she is.⁹ There is real change (*enkibelekenyata*), but it is not the change of proselytization. Similarly, an *oloyelaki* may maintain relationships with his biological family, but he is now fully a member of his new Maasai family.

Although some older missionary models mistakenly required Maasai to become *ilmeek* in order to become Christians, new missionary efforts which began in the 1970s recognized that when a Maasai is immersed into Jesus, he or she can (and should!) remain *olmaasani*. Today there are growing numbers of Maasai Christians in Kenya and Tanzania who recognize that Maa culture and Christianity are not incompatible. But there are still many Maasai who perceive conversion to Christ as an act of proselytization whereby one most forsake one’s Maasai-ness, one’s Africanity. Likewise, some African Christians struggle to know where to draw the line dividing contextualization from syncretism. This struggle is also true for the Maasai. But traditional Maasai practices “can and should be used in some measure to formulate an understanding of the Bible from an African context” without the displacement of “biblical revelation” (Mburu 2018, 7). The *enkiyieleta e mpere* ceremony may be a “redemptive analogy” (missionary Bible translator and missiologist Don Richardson’s phrase) enabling the Maasai churches to distinguish between conversion and mere proselytization. Moreover, the implications for such a contextual theology of conversion may be relevant to other East African contexts as well. This is true not only for Nilotic groups (e.g., Maasai, Samburu, Turkana, Kalenjin) but also for Bantu groups such as the Agĩkũyũ (ref. Kinoti 2010, 110 and 119; Kenyatta 1961, 22 and 323; Mbua 2018).

Perhaps the language and ritual elements of “the anointing of the spear” cultural practice can be incorporated into Maa baptismal liturgies. Maasai believers tend to have a period of being catechumens prior to being immersed. Can the Church refer to such new *ilairukok* (“believers”) as *ilooyela* (“those preparing to be anointed”) *le Kristo* (“of Christ”), and to the baptized as *ilooyelaki le Kristo* (“the anointed adoptees of Christ”)? When I have discussed this possibility with Maasai believers, they have uniformly been excited at how Christian teaching has the potential to fulfill Maa ideals and how Maa customs can make biblical teaching much clearer than approaches which assume Western (*olmeeki*) culture.

Conclusion

While true Christian conversion *does* involve significant change, *enkibelekenyata*, this transformation does not change the new Maasai believer into an *olmeeki*: he or she remains completely *olmaasani yet turns to Christ*. Reflecting on a conversation which he had had with Andrew Walls, Christopher Wright notes that “the vast, global, and cultural diversity of the Christian church today is the legitimate fruit of this essential distinction between conversion (i.e., conversion to *Christ* within any culture) and proselytism (which essentially says, ‘You first must *become like us*’). Sadly, Christian mission has not always preserved this distinction” (Wright 2004, 19; emphases original). In order to maintain this necessary distinction, my conversation partners among Maasai Christians agree that the Maa cultural practice of *enkiyieleta e mpere* can be an effective way to explain the biblical conception of Christian conversion—both what it is and what it is not—in the Maasai context.

References

- Asamoah-Gyadu, J. Kwabena (2011). “Turning That Which Is Already There toward Christ’: The Contribution of Andrew F. Walls to Understanding African Christianity,” Chapter 14 in William R. Burrows, Mark R. Gornik, and Janice A. McLean, eds., *Understanding World Christianity: The Vision and Work of Andrew F. Walls*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 193-203.
- Bediako, Kwame (1992). *Theology & Identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and modern Africa*. Regnum Studies in Mission. Oxford: Regnum Books.
- _____ (1995). *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- Biblia Sinyati: te nkutuk oo IMaasai o natisiraki eng’ejuk* (2018). Nairobi: The Bible Society of Kenya. (Abbreviated as “BSM2018.”)
- Biblia Sinyati: te nkutuk oo IMaasai o sotua musana o sotua ng’ejuk* (1991). Nairobi: The Bible Society of Kenya; Dodoma: The Bible Society of Tanzania. (Abbreviated as “BSM1991.”)
- Buell, Denise Kimber (2005). *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Burrows, William R. (2011). “Conversion: Individual and Cultural,” Chapter 9 in William R. Burrows, Mark R. Gornik and Janice A. McLean, eds., *Understanding World Christianity: The Vision and Work of Andrew F. Walls*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 96-113.
- Cornelli, Evaristi Magoti (2017). “Inter-religious Relations,” in Kenneth R. Ross, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 411-420.

- Cronk, Lee (2002). "From True Dorobo to Mukogodo Maasai: Contested Ethnicity in Kenya" *Ethnology* 41(1): 27–49.
- _____. (2004). *From Mukogodo to Maasai: Ethnicity and Cultural Change in Kenya*. Westview Case Studies in Anthropology, Ed., Edward F. Fischer. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004.
- Denis, Philippe (2016). "Christianity in Southern Africa," Chapter 21 in Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner, chief eds., Chammah Kaunda and Kennedy Owino, assoc. eds., *Anthology of African Christianity*. Regnum Studies in Global Christianity. Oxford: Regnum, 248-258.
- Donovan, Vincent J. (1978). *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- _____. (1982). *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*. 2nd Edition. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- _____. (2003). *Christianity Rediscovered*. 25th Anniversary Edition. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- Falconer, Robert (2015). *Spectacular Atonement: Envisioning the Cross of Christ in an African Perspective*. Sloane Park, South Africa: South African Theological Seminary Press.
- Fernández-Armesto, Felipe (2009). "Prologue: Conceptualizing Conversion in Global Perspective: from Late Antique to Early Modern," in Calvin B. Kendall, Oliver Nicholson, William D. Phillips, Jr., and Marguerite Ragnow, eds., *Conversion to Christianity from Late Antiquity to the Modern Age: Considering the Process in Europe, Asia, and the Americas*. Minnesota Studies in Early Modern History 1, Ed., Edward L. Farmer. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Center for Early Modern History, 13-44.
- Goodman, Martin (1994). *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hillman, Eugene (1993). *Toward an African Christianity: Inculturation Applied*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press.
- Hodgson, Dorothy L. (2011). *Once Intrepid Warriors: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Cultural Politics of Maasai Development*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Hoehler-Fatton, Cynthia (1996). *Women of Fire and Spirit: History, Faith, and Gender in Roho Religion in Western Kenya*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- The Holy Bible, New International Version: Containing the Old Testament and the New Testament* (1984). International Bible Society.
- Hull, Bill (2016). *Conversion and Discipleship*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.
- Ikenga-Metuh, Emefie (1987). "The Shattered Microcosm: A Critical Survey of Explanations of Conversion in Africa," in Kirsten Holst Petersen, ed., *Religion, Development and African Identity*. Seminar Proceedings 17. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies., 11-27
- Kenyatta, Jomo (1961). *Facing Mount Kenya: The traditional life of the Gikuyu*. London: Mercury Books. (Previously published by Secker & Warburg, 1938.)

- Kinoti, Hannah Wangeci (2010). *African Ethics: Gĩkũyũ Traditional Morality*. Studies in Intercultural Philosophy 19, ed., G. Wakuraya Wanjohi, with Gerald J. Wanjohi. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Kling, David W. (2014). "Conversion to Christianity," Chapter 27 in Rambo R. Lewis and Charles E. Farhadian, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 598-631.
- _____ (2020). *A History of Christian Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ole Kulet, Henry R. (1971). *Is It Possible?* Nairobi: Longhorn Publishers.
- Lamphear, John (1993). "Aspects of 'Becoming Turkana': Interactions & Assimilation Between Maa- & Ateker-Speakers," Chapter 4 in Thomas Spear and Richard Waller, eds., *Being Maasai*. Eastern African Studies. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 87–104.
- Landman, Christina and Hannelie Yates (2017). "Africanity and research: A case study in rural South Africa." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(4): Article 4775, 9 pages.
- Lekundayo, Godwin (2013). *The Cosmic Christ: Towards Effective Mission Among the Maasai*. Regnum Studies in Mission. Oxford: Regnum.
- Mbua, Abigael Wangari (2018). "The Kikuyu Conceptualization of Adoption: A Cognitive Grammar Approach" *Impact: Journal of Transformation* 1(1): 90–121.
- Mburu, Elizabeth (2018). *African Hermeneutics*. Nairobi: HippoBooks.
- Mol, Frans (1996). *Maasai Language and Culture*. Lemek, Kenya: Maasai Centre Lemek.
- Neckebrouck, Valeer (1993). *Resistant Peoples: The Case of the Pastoral Maasai of East Africa*. Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures XIV. Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana.
- _____ (2002). *Le Maasai et le Christianism: Le temps du grand refus*. Annuua Nuntia Lovaniensia XLI. Leuven: Peeters.
- Nkesela, Zephania Shila (2020). *A Maasai Encounter with the Bible: Nomadic Lifestyle as a Hermeneutic Question*. Bible and Theology in Africa 30. New York: Peter Lang.
- Oden, Thomas C. (2007). *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books.
- _____ (2011). *The African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic.
- O'Sullivan, Tomás (2016). "Christianity and the European Conversions," Chapter 5 in Lamin Sanneh and Michael J. McClymond, eds., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Christianity*. Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 54–66.
- Priest, Doug, Jr. (1990). *Doing Theology with the Maasai*. Pasadena, California: William Carey Library.
- Shaw, Mark (2010). *Global Awakening: How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic.

- Sundkler, Bengt and Steed, Christopher (2004). *A History of Christianity in Africa*. Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia 74. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rambo, Lewis R. and Farhadian, Charles E. (2014). "Introduction," in Rambo R. Lewis and Charles E. Farhadian, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-22.
- Rigby, Peter (1989). "Ideology, Religion, and Iparakuyo-Maasai Resistance to Capitalist Penetration" *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 23(3): 416–440.
- Sanneh, Lamin (2003). *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.
- Sobania, Neal W. (2003). *Culture and Customs of Kenya*. Culture and Customs of Africa. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Spear, Thomas and Waller, Richard, eds. (1993). *Being Maasai*. Eastern African Studies. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Strayer, Robert. "Mission History in Africa: New Perspectives on an Encounter," in Brendan Carmody, ed., *Religious Conversion: An African Perspective*. Lusaka, Zambia: Gadsen Publishers, 2018, 5-26. (An earlier version of this paper was published in *African Studies Review* 19 (1976): 1–15.)
- Taber, Charles R. (1991). *The World is Too Much with Us: Culture in Modern Protestant Missions*. The Modern Mission Era, 1792–1992: An Appraisal. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press.
- Talle, Aud (2004). "Adoption practices among the pastoral Maasai of East Africa: Enacting fertility," Chapter 5 in Fiona Bowie, ed., *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Adoption*. European Association of Social Anthropologists. New York: Routledge, 64-78.
- Thomas, Guy Alexander (2001). "Why Do We Need the White Man's God? African Contributions and Responses to the Formation of a Christian Movement in Cameroon, 1914-1968." PhD Dissertation. School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Available online at <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/29549/1/10731705.pdf> (accessed 17 February 2021).
- Van der Merwe, Dirk (2016). "From Christianising Africa to Africanising Christianity: Some hermeneutical principles" *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 2(2): 559–587.
- Waller, Richard (1993). "Acceptees & Aliens: Kikuyu Settlement in Maasailand," Chapter 11 in Thomas Spear and Richard Waller, eds., *Being Maasai*. Eastern African Studies. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 226-257.
- Walls, Andrew F. (2004). "Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28(1): 2–6.
- ____ (2010). "World Christianity and the Early Church," Chapter 1 in Akintunde E. Akinade, ed., *A New Day: Essays in Honor of Lamin Sanneh*. New York: Peter Lang, 17-30.
- ____ (2012). "Worldviews and Christian Conversion" Chapter 11 in John Corrie and Cathy Ross, eds., *Mission in Context: Explorations Inspired by J. Andrew Kirk*. Farnham, England: Ashgate, 155-166.

- ____ (2016). “The Transmission of Christian Faith,” Chapter 51 in Lamin Sanneh and Michael J. McClymond, eds., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Christianity*. Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 685-698.
- ____ (2017). *Crossing Cultural Frontiers: Studies in the History of World Christianity*. Mark R. Gornik, ed. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- ____ (2018). “New Testament Background of Conversion.” WC 970 (Culture and Conversion) PhD seminar lecture, Centre for World Christianity, Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, Africa International University, Nairobi, 12 March.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. (2004). “Implications of Conversion in the Old Testament and the New” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28(1): 14–19.
- Yong, Amos (2010). “Many Tongues, Many Practices: Pentecost and Theology of Mission at 2010.” Chapter 4 in Ogbu U. Kalu, Peter Vethanayagamony, and Edmund See-Fook Chia, eds., *Mission after Christendom: Emergent Themes in Contemporary Mission*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 43-58.

¹ The title intentionally draws on the influential 1993 volume edited by Thomas Spear and Richard Waller, *Being Maasai*.

² For a discussion on the use of the term ‘africanity,’ ref. Landman and Yates 2017.

³ Citing T. S. Maluleke, “Half a century of African Christian Theologies,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 7.

⁴ I am not sure how well he learned the Maa language, as he states that Maa lacks a future tense (Donovan 2003, 61), which is not quite accurate. There are other inaccuracies with his reports of the Maa language as well.

⁵ E.g., the verbs ἀλλάσσω (*allássō*), διερμηνεύω (*diermēneúō*), ἐπιστρέφω (*epistréphō*), ἐρμηνεύω (*hermēneúō*), μεταμέλομαι (*metamélomai*), μεταμορφόω (*metamorphōō*), μετανοέω (*metanoéō*), and μετασχηματίζω (*metaskhēmatízō*) and the nouns ἐπίλυσις (*epílusis*), ἐπιστροφή (*epistrophē*), ἐρμηνεία (*hermēneía*), μετάθεσις (*metáthesis*), μεταμόρφωσις (*metamórhōsis*), μετάνοια (*metánoia*), and τροπή (*tropē*).

⁶ BSM1991, jointly published by The Bible Society of Kenya and The Bible Society of Tanzania, was translated from the English *Revised Standard Version* with occasional reference to the English *Good News Bible* (sometimes referred to as *Today’s English Version*) without any recourse to the biblical languages. The corrected edition (BSM2018), released by The Bible Society of Kenya in 2018, did refer to the Hebrew and Greek, but this was one of the many suggested corrections which was not included. (Disclosure: I served as a translation consultant for BSM2018.) Both versions were ecumenical endeavors, with participants from Protestant mission churches, the Roman Catholic Church, AICs (African independent churches / African-initiated churches), and Pentecostal churches.

⁷ I am especially indebted to Francis ole Yenke, a Maasai of Olepishet near Naroosura and a dear friend and colleague, for helping me recognize the distinction between *oloyela* (‘the one about to be anointed’) and *oloyelieki* / *oloyelaki* (‘the anointed one,’ denoting the cross-cultural adoptee).

⁸ For insightful narratives of this tension from the perspective of a Maasai writer, see the novels of Henry R. ole Kulet, especially *Is It Possible?*

⁹ This insight was pointed out to me by my wife, Ruth Elizabeth Barron, who has spent more time with the Maasai mamas than I. It has since been confirmed to us by a number of Maasai, both husbands and wives.