

The History of The New Jerusalem Church of Tongaren, Kenya, 2011-2023

©Levin Wanaswa

Department of Philosophy, Religion and Theology, Moi University, Kenya



Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the detailed history of The New Jerusalem Church (TNJC) from 2011 to 2023 in Kenya. I sought to find out the origin and background of TNJC, establish the factors responsible for its emergence, and establish the challenges faced by the founder and the members in promoting its activities. The study's location was in Bungoma County, Tongaren Sub-county, Kenya. The investigation remained flexible in the effort to follow up the history and survival of TNJC to details. The study took 2011 as the beginning point all through to 2023. The significance of 2011 is that it is the year TNJC was founded by Eliud Wekesa, well known as *Yesu wa Tongaren* in Tongaren. The year 2023 served as the convenient date to end the investigation after major transformations have taken places within the movement. This study found that the emergence of TNJC movement was a result of the call by the founder (Eliud Wekesa) and religious and cultural factors. The religious factors included the need by members of TNJC for a satisfying religion while the cultural factors included the forces of globalization such as freedom of religion. The study concludes that other than having a deep history, there are commendable factors that resulted in TNJC formation. To avoid suspicion and accusations from society, this study recommends that there should be registration of new religious movements (NRMs) by the government so that their objectives must be scrutinized for society to understand them. The study will benefit society by providing an impetus for people to understand the reasons for the emergence of NRMs. It will help them understand TNJC's founder, his followers and this church in general.

Keywords: Socio-religious, Transformations, The New Jerusalem Church of Tongaren

Introduction

New religious movements (NRMs) have become a major form of Christianity in Africa today. In 2021, Kenya had a population of 47,664,296 (State of Kenya Population Report, 2021), with a composition of 14.7% protestants, 23.4% Catholics, 11.9% Hindus, 11.2% Muslims, 1.6% "Atheists," and 1.7 % African traditional religionists (ATRs). Nonetheless, the total population identifying itself with NRMs has not come out openly as members are syncretic: i.e. combining African religion, Christianity or Islam. Most of these NRMs occupy

a peripheral position in Kenyan society and their religious functions are not well known as some focus on social challenges while others are political (Siavoshi, 2017).

Previous studies that have examined the emergence of NRMs posit that the main causes of the rapid emergence of independent religious movements are due to socioeconomic and political factors occasioned by social injustices and disruption of African social life by colonialists and missionaries (Schrippa, 2019). It seems that most NRMs in Africa emerged to challenge the Eurocentric disposition of the mainline churches (Shangarai, 2015). As a result, NRMs are perceived as African expressions of Christianity. Consequently, this has caused an alarming rate of the exodus of members from mainstream churches to NRMs (Masondo, 2005). NRMs were founded by African nationalists to protest against colonial rule and to pursue the policy of African self-expression and freedom from missionary control. African Christians desired to have the freedom to exercise their charismatic gifts which the mainstream churches did not permit (Nthamburi, 2000).

Masondo (2014) estimates that there are 180 independent churches in Kenya with the majority of them located in the Western part of the country among the Luo and Luhya communities. According to him, the majority of these movements were founded by lay people who were concerned about the authenticity of the Church and indigenizing Christianity by incorporating African traditional beliefs and practices. Notably, these movements are flourishing faster than the mission-founded churches, a factor associated with relevancy to their adherents.

A study done by Koech (2008) claims that the factors responsible for the emergence of African independent churches (AICs) can be classified into non-religious, religious and theological groupings. The non-religious emerged due to historical aspects, political issues and social injustice. The study was significant in providing the opportunity to understand the developments of AICs up to the present.

Johnson (2011) contends in his study on the Aladura movement in West Africa that the formation of African independent churches was primarily inspired by creative religious movements that offered safety and spiritual guidance in the context of newly-formed groups rather than the social, economic and political issues that Africans faced during the colonial period. Johnson also praises the crucial role those inspirational African leaders have had in the expansion of independent religious movements. He further looks at the psychological, political, and economic factors that contributed to the establishment of indigenous movements. Johnson's research helped me to study the causes of the establishment of TNJC whose leader claims to have been called by God.

Several academics have written books about African religious life, customs, and the social history of certain communities. Mbiti (2015) shares a common understanding of the widespread religiosity of traditional African civilization and claims that Africans are well known for their religiosity. He believes that religion enters every aspect of life so thoroughly that it is impossible or difficult to isolate it. He goes on to say that religion is the most important component of traditional culture and likely has the greatest impact on how people think and behave. According to Asante and Manama (2009), all people are naturally religious since God made them that way. Mbiti agrees that humans are incurably religious. Cipriani (2015) connects the conditions that may lead to the establishment of religious movements in society to the decreasing integrative role of religion.

Christianity in Kenya: A Brief Background

In 1844 after Johann Ludwig Krapf of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) introduced Christianity in Kenya, he established a station at Rabai, Mombasa (Owino et al., 2017). Due to the language barrier and influence from Islamic communities, Krapf decided to move

along with fellow missionary Johann Rebman into the interior parts of Kamba land and Taita. It was not until the 1870s after the conversion of freed slaves at Frere town near Mombasa that Christianity started spreading in the coastal parts of Kenya.

Thereafter, in 1883, the CMS found its way into the interior parts of Kenya leading to the establishment of missions in Voi, Nairobi, Kikuyu and Ukambani. This was possible through the British East Africa Protectorate and the building of the Uganda Railway which aided the transport of the missionaries. Later, in 1901, the American Friends Mission organized the Friends Africa Industrial Mission in Western Kenya led by Willis Hotchkiss who established a center at Kaimosi (Owino et al, 2017). In 1905, another United States-based missionary joined through the Church of God under the leadership of Yohanna Mbila, a South African who was later recognized as an outstanding evangelist in Kima, Bunyore-Western Kenya. Later in 1906, the German Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) commenced their missionary work in Kisii and Luo Nyanza. Afterwards, the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada began their mission in Western Kenya in 1921 where they set up a mission center at a place known as Nyang'ori (Wasike, 2020).

The missionaries paved the way for the later success of the Church in Kenya. Initially, however, their approaches were largely negative towards African religion (Gathogo, 2022). They condemned African rituals and practices and painted them as dark, bad, and of no value. As a result, they denied Africans leadership positions (Ositelu, 2002). Consequently, they outlawed some African cultural practices such as polygamy and initiation which caused dissatisfaction among some Africans. Due to this, some African Christian converts formed their own AIC's where they incorporated African practices that had not been tolerated by the missionary churches (Adogame, 2005). Examples of such movements were; *Dini Ya Musambwa* under the leadership of Elijah Masinde in 1930 (Mwangi, 2016) and the Church of the Lord (Aladura) in Ghana (Akindolie, 2020). These movements were aimed at restoring the traditional Luyha and Ghana religions, respectively.

After the 1970s, more NRMs sprung among the Luhya and the Luo people of Western Kenya due to the post-colonial political, cultural and social crisis as well as the issue of enculturation of their African cultures (Nandi & Kima, 2015). In addition, their African desire for healing and helping fellow Africans to face real-life challenges became their motivation (Adogame, 2005). Such movements include the Nomiya Luo Mission founded by Yohana Owalo in 1914 that later broke away from the Roman Catholic Church, the Roho Movement which was founded by Alfayo Odongo and split from the Friends Mission in 1912, Dini ya Roho which was founded by Jacob Buluku and Daniel Sande which also broke from Friends Mission in 1927 (Akunda, 2010). Other movements include the Legio Maria Movement (a splinter group of the Roman Catholic Church) by Luo Prophetess Aoko in 1963, the Africa Israel Church Nineveh (splinter group from the Pentecostal Mission) that started under the foundation of Paul David Zakayo Kivuli in 1942 (Nandi et al., 2015).

By 2023, Kenya had a large number of organized prophetic new religious movements led by self-declared prophets that promise spiritual salvation to their adherents. Such movements included New Life International Church (NLIC) founded by Pastor Ezekiel Odera in 2010 and Good News International Ministries (GNIM) founded by Paul Nthenge Mackenzie and his first wife in 2003. These movements are known for attracting more crowds than usual in their churches and to public meetings. Pastor Odera's NLIC came to be known publicly after he pulled a huge crowd that was rumored to be over 50,000 at the Kasarani Stadium in Nairobi (Mutuku, 2023). This was one of the largest crowds ever pulled in Kenya by a religious leader. Not even a politician had attracted such a huge crowd. The GNIM of Pastor Mackenzie came into the limelight in April 2023 when it was associated with cults due to indoctrination in its teachings. Paul Mackenzie, leader of the GNIM, was accused of ordering his followers to starve their children and themselves to death in order to

“meet Jesus,” resulting in the deaths of more than 200 people (Momanyi, 2023). Western Kenya is also not exempt as such movements have emerged there. Some of these movements include Lost Israelites Ministries of Jehovah Wanyonyi, the Jerusalem Church of Christ of Prophetess Mary Snaida Akatsa, and Muungano Church of Holy Spirit for all Nations of Ronald Nakalila commonly known as Nabii Yohana. Remarkably, these movements exhibit a combination of aspects of African traditional religion and Christianity.

Notably, these new movements were formed to offer responses to the historically unprecedented levels of change in every aspect of their congregants’ lives. Such areas of life included cultural, economic, social, political and religious that followed the imposition of colonial rule that began in the second half of the 19th Century (Gathogo, 2022). Seemingly, these movements are highly pluralistic and syncretic since they freely combine some doctrines and practices from diverse sources within their belief systems. Some are usually founded by highly charismatic and authoritarian leaders believed to wield extraordinary powers or insights (Adedibu, 2022). There are several explanations regarding TNJC, especially about its history and the personality of the founder. The foregoing has resulted in several questions than answers arising from the general society. To understand TNJC, this study specifically sought to answer the following question: What is the history of the formation of the New Jerusalem Church of Tongaren in Bungoma County?

Theoretical Perspective on the Emergence of NRMs

In order to analyze and give a detailed history of TNJC in Tongaren, Bungoma County, this study utilized the Social Movement Theory (SMT). This theory was generated by Charles Tilly and Sydney Tarrow (2004) who argue that social movements were formed with the purpose of signaling change, especially to people who were airing out grievances. These movements transform into masses aimed at religious, social, or political change, which are rarer.

Tilly and Tarrow (2004) offer a particularly useful summary of the theory, including its evolution and causal logic. Over time it has been accepted and advanced by other proponents of the theory that SMT posits those political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes explain the necessary conditions that transform grievances into activism (Cummings, 2018). In their process of taking shape, social movements are highly visible collectives that aim to mobilize large numbers of people to effect change. Social movements tend to draw on preexisting groups and their networks to mobilize individuals into loosely affiliated collectives. Tilly and Tarrow (2004), describe the following three variables that scholars of SMT have identified as necessary conditions for social movements to emerge: (1) relative deprivation, (2) collective behaviors, and (3) resource mobilization.

Throughout history, numerous social movements have arisen and fundamentally altered the societies in which they took place. According to Tilly and Tarrow (2004), political chances that combine conventional and unconventional modes of action and build on social networks and cultural frames catalyze social movements. Large, typically powerless and uninvolved groups of individuals decide to support or oppose social change using novel strategies in social movements. For my present study, poverty and the emergence of new religious movements are related. This proposition is predicated on the idea that new religious groups enlist the support of individuals who are marginalized in the present society and believe that they are not getting a fair share of what is ostensibly available.

This study was guided by the SMT, which assumed that people who feel deprived of certain resources are the origins of new religious movements like TNJC. The members came together to establish a new world order where people could find acceptance and value among one another in addition to expressing their goal to end relative deprivation. The movement

was started in opposition to the missionary churches unhealthy competitiveness, leadership disputes, and theological doctrinal disagreements. It was discovered that the Abaluhya community encountered different distributions of highly esteemed qualities such as power, prestige, status, and opportunities for social and religious participation when missionaries were present. As a result, individuals or groups within the mission churches felt disadvantaged in comparison to others and consequently formed socio-religious groups. To provide spiritual chaplaincy that addressed the deprivation issue, TNJC arose.

This study showed that the confrontation between European missionary churches and local cultures and religions led to the establishment of TNJC in Western Kenya. To improve people's living situations, this community of believers worked cooperatively to favorably alter and transform social, political and economic reality.

Research Methodology and Design

A phenomenological, qualitative approach was utilized in this study. This means that it dealt with the opinions of both the adherents and non-adherents of TNJC (including the founder) on matters of history and factors that led to the emergence of TNJC within Tongaren, Bungoma County. Twenty-two key informants who knew the emergence of TNJC were the subjects of the study.

This study used cluster, purposive and snowball sampling based on predetermined variables like membership, age, gender and leadership roles to select its participants. Residents living around Eliud Wekesa's home were sampled through cluster sampling. Later, snowball sampling was used to identify five clerical leaders of TNJC and two community leaders who were key informants of the targeted leadership positions. During snowballing, members of TNJC referred me to leaders who they considered to be more knowledgeable about the emergence of TNJC, its teachings and doctrines. Purposive sampling was used to select 15 key respondents. All of the key informants were above 18 years of age and they were selected based on their perceived capability to have adequate information about the history of TNJC since 2011.

Primary data were obtained from 22 key informants who were believed to know the foundation of TNJC. These data were collected using interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs). Oral In-depth Interviews were used to gather information from selected Church leaders who were key informants of the study. The method entailed the use of in-depth oral interviews because of the small number of leaders. An interview schedule was employed by the researcher to gather qualitative data. The interviews were recorded for later analysis with permission from the interviewees. The study conducted seven interviews on the founder, four clerical leaders and two community leaders who were interviewed about the history and the factors that led to the emergence of TNJC.

The study used three FGDs to get information from 15 members of TNJC. Each group comprised of five members of TNJC. The three groups comprised five adult women, five adult men, and five young people who identified themselves as members of TNJC. Focus group discussion guides were used to provide a list of items for discussion. This instrument sought to explore the members' perceptions about the founder of TNJC. During the discussions, in-depth probing was used to elicit clarification of points and ideas on the history of the church. The FGDs were used because they permitted a greater depth of response from the respondents who expressed their feelings without restrictions. They were also effective because of the homogeneity of the groups and they provided room for interactions. Like the interviews, the discussions were recorded for later analysis with permissions from the participants. Short notes were also taken during the discussion.

Secondary data were obtained from written materials such as journals, magazines,

newspapers, government publications, seminar papers, dissertations, books and articles on the formation of TNJC. These data were gathered from several libraries. Internet resources made a valuable contribution to secondary data as well.

Analysis and Discussion

The study attempted to explore the history and the factors responsible for the emergence of TNJC of Tongaren, Bungoma County. This was made possible by focusing on the issues explored in the following subsections based on the data acquired in the field.

Historical Background of TNJC

TNJC has its roots in the Christian missionary activities that took place in the Bungoma County region of Kenya during the early 20th Century (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022). The church's history can be traced back to the arrival of European missionaries, particularly representatives of the CMS from Britain who began their work in the area around Tongaren in the early 1900s, introducing Christianity and establishing schools and churches. The missionaries focused on preaching the Gospel, teaching Christian doctrine, and providing education and healthcare services to the local population (Owino et al., 2017).

As the Christian faith took root in the Tongaren area, a local young man who belonged to one of the Catholic Church in Tongaren claimed to have received a call from God to start his religion. The young man, Eliud Wekesa, known as *Mwalimu Yesu wa Tongaren* declared himself Jesus. TNJC was established as an independent Christian denomination that emerged out of this community in the year 2011 (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022).

TNJC has its unique characteristics and practices influenced by the cultural context of the Tongaren community. It combines Christian teachings with traditional African elements, incorporating local cultural expressions into its worship and spiritual practices. TNJC has grown to become a significant religious presence in the Bungoma County region, with a network of churches and a community of believers who identify with its teachings and practices. The denomination continues to play a vital role in the spiritual and social life of its members and contributes to the broader religious landscape of the region (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022). The headquarters of TNJC is located in Lukhokwe village, Tongaren Sub-county Bungoma County. It mostly operates on a coalition basis with other churches. For instance, it has over 100 Christians who are members of other denominations from other counties in Kenya who come in for prayers and fellowships.

Early Years and Foundation of TNJC

The study discovered that TNJC is the church of Eliud Wekesa well known as *Yesu wa Tongaren*. Its history can be traced a long way from the social, cultural and religious developments of Christian civilization. The members of TNJC credit the formation of this movement to their founder whom they believed is a return of the historical Jesus of Nazareth with the submission to the will of God.

TNJC was founded in 2011 by Eliud Wekesa, a Kenyan from Tongaren in Bungoma County. Stories and circumstances surrounding his birth and childhood are mysterious. The study established that Wekesa was born in 1981 in a village known as Lukhokwe in Tongaren. He is the last born among his six siblings. His father's name was Francis Wekesa Simiyu while his mother's name was Cecilia Simiyu. Both of his parents were farmers. His parents died when he was young, but he managed to attain basic education. Eliud went

through his early formal education in Mukuyuni Primary School from Standard One to Standard Seven just like any other child in Lukhokhwe. As a result of his exposure to formal education, he can read, speak and write English, Kiswahili and Abaluhya languages. Eliud is commonly known by his followers as *Mwalimu* (Teacher) or Jesus of Tongaren. Mwalimu *Yesu wa Tongaren* believes he is the real Jesus Christ on a mission to save the world (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022).

Before his calling, he was a committed Christian in the Catholic Church. He was baptized to the Catholic Church in the year 1982 and attended all the Catholic rituals. At the age of ten, Wekesa started having dreams and seeing visions. In one of his visions, he saw prophets and prophetesses of the Old Testament such as Abraham, Deborah, Lydia, Elkanah and Joel who descended from Heaven and greeted him as “the mighty chosen one.” Later on, in another vision, he saw himself walking around a world that was full of stars under a blue sky. In another vision he saw the end of the world and God asked him to enter into the underground world in a journey that took several days. He received another vision at the age of 12 when he heard a voice call his name and told him to do some calculations with assistance from a prophet who he recognized as Prophet Gideon. From the vision, it is clear that God called Eliud at a tender age of ten (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022).

Mwalimu Yesu believes that God gave him the name *Yesu* in order to fulfill his mission on Earth. He was asked to preach to the people and tell those who believe in his world that they will live forever. During the visions, God asked him to quit all that he was doing to serve Him through converting people. He further explained that the blood in the visions referred to human beings while the fish with different colors referred to people of different races (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022).

This study discovered that Wekesa officially received his divine calling to his ministry in 2011 when he was 30 years old. The Holy Spirit descended commissioning him to establish a New Jerusalem in Kenya. He received a vision while he was at Kamukuywa Market along Kitale-Webuye Road in Tongaren, Bungoma County. In the vision, he saw God’s prophets wearing bright clothes with sandals on their feet cotton bags and rods in their hands. Afterwards, a voice from heaven commanded him to leave all that he was doing to accomplish his mission on earth. In a vision, Prophet Moses called all other prophets one by one. He then saw a bleeding human heart that he later found out that it was Jesus of Nazareth’s heart oozing blood covered with flames of fire. Suddenly, the heart entered into him and a voice was heard from above saying “That is my chosen son. Listen to him and to you my son, your house is henceforth a house of kings and it is blessed. Your name will therefore be ‘Jesus’ for you are the savior of the world” (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022). From that point on, Wekesa believes that his name is ‘Jesus’ and his mission on Earth has begun. Consequently, having witnessed the transformations, some people thought he had gone mad because of the expressions he was making (oral interview, key respondent, June 9, 2022).

Although Wekesa was raised with a strong Catholic foundation, he defected in the year 2011 with several others who felt that the Catholic Church was hindering their progress of salvation. According to Wekesa, he felt that the Roman Catholic’s mode of worship and religious teachings was not satisfying to his soul’s beliefs and practices. He had a genuine thirst for spiritual nourishment that was un-explainable. Wekesa further explains that through the calling he had received from God, it felt like there was a new and deeper level of spirituality that only God was directing him to (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022). The foregoing is in line with the discovery of Pretorius (2007) that there are people within the mainline churches that feel unfulfilled; hence; they experience a desire for a deeper level of spirituality. At this point, Wekesa says that he was ready to give up everything for the sake of God, leading him to form a movement of his own (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022).

Before his calling, as this study noted found out, Wekesa lived a normal life that included having one wife and seven children, and attending beer-drinking parties and discos. After the calling, Wekesa changed his lifestyle and devoted his life to prayer and intensive Bible study. He started his evangelical activity and teachings in 2009 which drew many people to his group. He preached piety, baptism in the Holy Spirit, and repentance. The majority of the crowd appeared to be drawn to his lectures on repentance. He preached a message of emancipation from missionary churches' enslavement. The teachings of Wekesa, according to a member, were very relevant for the populace at that time, when they desperately needed God to deliver them from the cruelty of spiritual slavery (oral interview, key respondent, June 9, 2022).

This study discovered that during his home fellowships in his new formed independent Church, Wekesa began to experience more intense regular dreams and visions. He experienced spiritual renewal and led his members to non-compulsory prayer meetings where they could publicly confess their sins. As time went on, more individuals started to join Wekesa's church as a result of their newfound personal encounters with the Holy Spirit and their awareness that this church catered for their society's more profound spiritual needs. In 2011, TNJC was founded in Tongaren, Bungoma County, as a result of his work (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022).

Wekesa spent a lot of time studying the Bible after receiving his divine calling. His focus was mostly on the teachings of the Old Testament, speaking in tongues, meditations, dreams, and intercessory prayer, which were all used in conjunction with prayers. His entire life got closely entwined with the founding and growth of TNJC, the first such religious organization in Western Kenya. Wekesa is the supreme leader of this church and is usually assisted by "human angels" like Angel Gabriel, Rueben and Micah to perform his duties. He is the supreme leader with the mandate to baptize new converts, conduct marriages and perform ordination ceremonies. He chose 12 disciples to help him run his church. The 12 disciples' names are in accordance to the descendants of Jacob (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022).

Factors that Led to the Emergence of the New Jerusalem Church of Tongaren

Forces of globalization have birthed favorable conditions for the emergence of NRMs in Kenya, TNJC not being the exception. These forces of globalization include efficient transportation, immigration, instant global communication, cultural linkages, cultural liberalism, human rights, democracy, secularization, individualism, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and emerging pluralistic societies. These forces have established a fertile ground for growth of NRMs in Kenya, and particularly in Tongaren, Bungoma County (Mukanda et al., 2015).

Religious and social liberalism has given people more freedom to join the religion of their choice. Liberalism renders legitimacy to cultural pluralism, which gives rise to a multitude of worldviews in human society (Bamidele, 2017). Moreover, liberalism allows the formation of new religious ideologies to develop and proliferate in the new world without unbearable pressure to conform to conventional social norms. Strong concern for human rights in this globalized world also gives shelter and recognition for different types of NRMs. In the case of TNJC, the members are promised a solution to the hardships they are facing in life by their founder.

The study further reveals that another factor that resulted in the emergence of TNJC is the founder's religious experience. Religious experiences, according to Zalta et al. (2002), are encounters between supernatural beings with human beings. Such encounters seem to have specific realistic objectives toward a specific human being. That reality can be an individual,

a state of affairs, a fact, or even an absence, depending on the religious tradition of which the experience is a part. Many important founders of religions, both orthodox and NRMs, were inspired through some religious experiences. During my field work, four out of five respondents agreed that they were converted because they had one form of religious experience either directly or indirectly. Other members of TNJC claimed that they had a radical transformation of life or worldview and then adopted a new commitment as a result of their religious experiences. As mentioned earlier, Wekesa believes that he got his inspiration from God in 2011 to start TNJC because he believed God told them to do so (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022).

In addition, TNJC started due to the spiritual hunger of the people of Bungoma. Most of the missionary churches in Bungoma could not satisfy the spiritual hunger making some Christians to join TNJC for spiritual nourishment (oral interview, Barasa, June 9, 2022). The founder agreed that members of Bungoma County were in dire need of a satisfying religion. The TNJC addresses the needs of most of the people of Bungoma such as the spiritual, psychological, social and physical needs. During my field work, most members of TNJC explained that this religion gives them self-fulfillment which they missed before joining it.

During the study, it was established that the Holy Spirit played a role in the founding of Wekesa's church. It is because of this that the followers of this religion refer to themselves as *Watu wa Yesu wa Tongaren*, which translates to "the chosen people of Jesus of Tongaren". He desired to build a people among the Africans through whom he would reveal his will. Believers in TNJC hold that these are the final days and that God will shortly begin a brand-new Heaven and world. Everyone is asked to live a life that will result in the gaining of salvation because a person's time in this world is considered to be transitory.

Also, the presence of charismatic leaders who are able to inspire and mobilize followers is often a key factor in the emergence of a religious movement. People are attracted to TNJC because of the fruits of the gifts of the Holy Spirit presented by God to their leader. After God's revelation to the founder, they received the gifts of the Holy Spirit of prophesy, healing, and speaking in tongues. Since then, members of this church display spiritual gifts. Wekesa experienced a Trinitarian vocation to his mission in 2011. According to him, this marked a turning point in his life that resulted in the birth of his church (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022). Seemingly, God's revealing his mission to Wekesa came during the right time when missionary churches were unable to solve the problems of the people such as illness, misfortunes, poverty, encounters with evils, barrenness, and most of their social problems like lack of love and understanding toward their adherents (oral interview, Barasa, June 9, 2022). People who go to his church hold him in the highest regard, and they were amazed by his ability to heal the sick and do other amazing things. His wife claims that at one point he performed a miracle by turning water into tea (Khaemba, 2023).

It was also evident during the study that TNJC emerged as a rebellion to injustices in the Roman Catholic Church, as it interfered with some of the indigenous cultural traditions by denouncing and rejecting several Luhya practices. For instance, the Church of Scotland Mission established a priority list of the customs that needed to be abandoned. According to Mwangi (2016), these were practices that were thought to be at odds with Christian values but were not necessarily actively hostile to them and were therefore to be permitted to fade away on their own. Respect for ancestral spirits, the traditional sacrificial system, and the use of sorcery and prophecy all fall under this category. Polygamy and sexually explicit dances were among the customs that were condemned as being incompatible with Christian values and, hence, inappropriate in a Christian community. The missionaries also objected to practices such as polygamy and the exposing of the dead that were thought to be unhealthy or unsanitary (oral interview, Nasike, June 9, 2022).

Correspondingly, TNJC of Tongaren also emerged as a response to a perceived loss of

traditional cultural values in the area. The movement sought to reclaim and preserve cultural traditional beliefs and practices, while also incorporating Christian elements and using drums during worship. Denunciation of the Bukusu culture, which missionaries had perceived as primitive and demonic, went hand in hand with the adoption of previous Christian missionary teachings among the Bukusu people (Wekesa, 2021). Critically, it can be deduced that this was accomplished without considering the significance to the Bukusu people's traditional way of life. The missionaries attacked their native healing practices right away since they conflicted with their Christian missionary teachings. European missionaries referred to Bukusu local healing as witchcraft and paganism. In addition, they were viewed as being anti-civilization (Robert, 2009). The missionaries established health centers in their mission stations where they referred the ill African converts in an effort to prevent these practices. The four pillars of Western civilization—the school, the church, a health facility, and a farm to provide some income—were therefore present in the majority of mission stations. Africans were also converted in the schools and medical facilities (Robert, 2009). African converts were dissatisfied because mission churches were unable to understand the Bukusu's salvatory demands, which were plainly communicated in relation to the illness's causes. The Bukusu converts who returned to their ancient religions that provided supernatural healing left a spiritual void.

Other factors that were responsible for the inception of TNJC included spiritual revival: Indeed, the founding of the church was significantly sparked by a perceived need for spiritual renewal or a desire for a more personal and transformative religious experience. Also, the cultural and societal context in which the church emerged played a role in its founding. This includes factors such as social unrest, economic challenges, or changes in the local community. That TNJC arose as a response to these challenges, offering a sense of hope, meaning and community, is hardly a matter of dispute.

It was also noted that TNJC presented unique doctrinal teachings or interpretations of existing religious beliefs. These new ideas or interpretations resonated with individuals seeking alternative perspectives or deeper understandings of religious principles.

In addition, the establishment of TNJC was driven by the need for a close-knit community that offers social connections, emotional support, and a shared sense of purpose and identity. Religious movements often provide a sense of community, belonging, and support for their members.

Furthermore, TNJC emerged through the blending of different religious traditions, beliefs, or practices. It incorporated elements from traditional Bukusu beliefs, Christianity, or other religious influences, thereby establishing a unique syncretic expression of spirituality.

The African worldview is governed by certain forces which are thought to act in situations that are beyond the control of humans (Mbiti, 2015). Thus, members of TNJC were tired of tolerating the patronizing behavior of the missionary-founded churches, whose membership was severely separating them from the mainline churches due to their level of societal integration (Omenyo, 2011). TNJC arose to prominence as a result of the aforementioned elements, which include receiving God's divine call, the yearning for African self-expression, and religious freedom from missionary influence.

Jesus of Tongaren's Acceptance in the Society

During the beginning of his ministry, Wekesa received a lot of backlash from members of his society (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022). Having grown up with human parents (Francis Wekesa Simiyu and Cecilia Simiyu) who were farmers, he faced rejection as the people did not believe him. To the people of Tongaren, Wekesa was a farmer's child. He grew up in Lukhokhwe Village, and they knew him as just a commoner. To others, he was a

childhood friend who they had seen grow; he was schoolmate and a classmate.

People of this locality took offense at what he was doing and who he claimed to be. They felt entitled to define *Yesu wa Tongaren* according to their terms. He was in turn accused of blasphemy by the local authorities. In their eyes, when *Yesu wa Tongaren* claimed to be the incarnate Jesus he was insulting God. He at some point was arrested with his followers (oral interview, Barasa, June 9, 2022). In response to the people's doubts, Wekesa quoted Mark 6:1-6 claiming that "A prophet receives no honor in his hometown" (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022)

Registered Membership of TNJC

The study revealed that members of TNJC are united by a belief in each human's ability to enter The New Jerusalem—thus, the name TNJC. They profess a holiness of all believers inspired by their founder Wekesa. In 2022, there was an estimate of 1,000 officially registered members of TNJC with 18% being youths, 32% children, and 48% adults (TNJC records, 2022).

Educational Backgrounds of the Members

The study discovered that initially, most TNJC members did not embrace Western education because their founder, Wekesa, considered it as the source of all evil. For Wekesa, anything Western in nature, except the Bible, was opposed by the members of TNJC. In addition, he considered education to be worldly and instructed his members to ignore it in order to concentrate on the Heavenly Kingdom.

Nonetheless, it was learned during the study that as at 2023, TNJC members concluded that education is important and that their children should pursue higher education. Thus, a voice of change from the rigid, restrictive views that forbade education inside this movement has been made. The first generation of the educated, committed and focused TNJC class emerged as a result of the rise of the organization's educated members starting in 2012. Following this, TNJC students from Tongaren began to enroll in educational institutions in large numbers by the year 2020 in order to pursue basic and higher education, which they believe is essential to the growth of the community.

Economic Patterns of Members of TNJC

TNJC members are urged by their leader to take on economic responsibilities in order to help their families and the community. Everyone in the family, even the children, has a financial responsibility to fulfill. As a result, the division of labor is based on sex and age. Men are known for providing security, supplying the family with food and necessities, clearing ground ahead of the planting season, erecting fences around farms, and taking care of the animals. The majority of the time, women are considered to be caregivers who raise children, cook, fetch water and firewood, thatch buildings, plaster walls with clay or cow dung, and perform farm work including planting, weeding, and harvesting. Boys are taught to go to the grazing field with their fathers or uncles, while girls are taught by mothers, aunts, and grandmothers how to do household tasks. The tasks are taught according to the gender of the children in each family. According to four out of five respondents, a male is unlikely to take on a woman's duty unless it is an emergency; the division of work is systematic and orderly to ensure the material wellbeing of the movement's participants. Laziness is highly condemned.

The study gleaned from TNJC accounts that agriculture is the main source of income for members and it has been practiced for a very long time. This is authenticated by their vast

amount of knowledge regarding farming practices. They grow maize for subsistence and sugarcane as a cash crop as well as wheat and coffee. Cattle are kept for milk and meat, and also for offers of sacrifice.

More precisely, the founder of TNJC, Wekesa, teaches that “humans cannot serve both God and wealth.” He asserts that money is a result of incorporation of the Kenyan culture with the Western society whereby wealth has triumphed over God. Wealth is generated by members of TNJC through inheritance, leasing of property, buying of property and land, while other members acquire wealth through gifts. Nonetheless, Wekesa claims that there is nothing wrong with wealth in itself if it is acquired righteously; nevertheless, it is wrong to desire to have more wealth. In the case of TNJC, most of the members use their wealth to help the less fortunate members in the society. A member of TNJC claims that they have a duty to help one another as a global family.

Tongaren’s neighboring settlements, now known as TNJC, were notoriously indolent and seldom bothered to work. Additionally, they opted out of owning property and participating in traditional economic activities. They were content to live simply as they awaited their ascension to celestial glory and saw no reason to rise out of their predicament of being the poorest of the poor.

Since TNJC was started in 2011, members have emerged from self-isolation and started collaborating with the rest of society as they seek other economic endeavors beyond basic farming in response to changing conditions. By starting self-help projects and cooperative organizations, they have actively participated in the Kenyan government’s efforts to increase productivity and, therefore, the welfare of the populace. Their commitment to integrity, honesty, and trust propelled many of them to greater economic success across a range of industries (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022).

A member revealed during the study that many people accumulated riches and power in the society as the elite TNJC class of 2011 emerged. Their passion for making money is evidence of how TNJC has evolved into contributing members of society. Many people in Tongaren engaged in trade activities and got along well with other people in the community. The early TNJC members’ reputation for exclusivity and isolation was successfully eradicated by this transition. By 2011, many TNJC community members had quickly caught up with the rest and built more gorgeous churches, permanent residences, and other structures, while others had relocated to urban locations in search of work and business prospects. Nonetheless, even though the industrial sector of the economy of the nation experienced significant expansion, most TNJC members were still mostly located in rural areas by the year 2022 (oral interview, Barasa, June 9, 2022).

Hierarchy of TNJC

Hierarchy is used in churches to denote how authority of rank and power is held according to the principality instituted by Christ in his church (Macdonald, 2019). Precisely, in TNJC, hierarchy involves having the authority of governing and ministering God’s word. This authority is divinely ordained by God and gave the primacy of authority to *Yesu wa Tongaren*. TNJC hierarchy is divided into an order with God The Father as the head. This hierarchical order includes God, The Holy Spirit, Jesus (Jesus of Tongaren), and Angelic beings, Disciples, Pastors and Deacons. Figure 1 indicates the hierarchy of TNJC.

It is evident from Figure 1 that God is at the top of all authority. Members of TNJC regard God as the Creator of the entire universe and all things in it. He is attributed to being omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. Beneath God is the Holy Spirit who is entirely without material bodies. To members of TNJC, the Holy Spirit was present before the creation of the universe and through his power, everything was made through God the Father.

Jesus of Tongaren comes third on the hierarchy. He is the founder, leader and owner of TNJC. To the members of this movement, he is the incarnation of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Thereafter, are the angelic beings whose purpose, according to an angel in TNJC, is “Communicating revelations from God, glorifying God and recording the events of Jesus of Tongaren.” (oral interview, Nanyama, June 9, 2022).

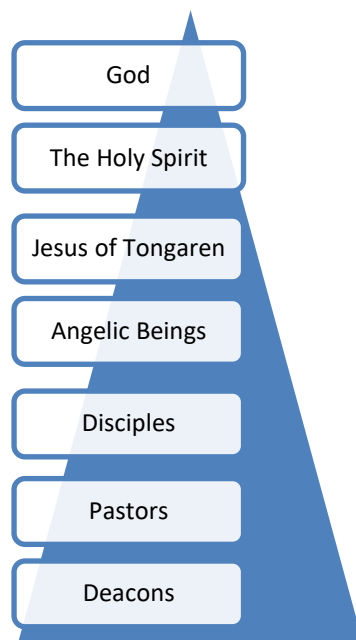


Figure 1: Hierarchy in TNJC
Source: TNJC records (2022)

The study also brought to light that disciples within TNJC are those who have been given the authority by Jesus of Tongaren to preach to all nations in order to attain unity within the church. Through them, the ministry of Jesus of Tongaren is preserved. Priests appear second to last in the hierarchy. By the authority vested in them by their leader and founder, they have the power to administer the Holy Eucharist and blood of Christ to the members of TNJC. The deacons serve as helpers to the pastors in matters pertaining to pastoral care of the sick and poor.

The Growth and Expansion of TNJC

The spread of TNJC spans between the periods of its formation in 2011 and 2022. This has in turn resulted in a spread that is fast reaching to the communities around Tongaren Sub-county and far beyond. Wekesa shared his religious beliefs with others. This was done through one-on-one conversation and large gatherings (crusades). His views were seen as a threat to society for he was accused of blasphemy several times. Wekesa however did not give up on his mission since he believed it was the will of God. He continued to share his beliefs without despair. In the same year, 2011 he managed to convert his wife and later his children. The conversion of people to TNJC was majorly boosted by the founder himself. Most of the significant spread occurred in 2012 with the help of his wife *Nabii Benjamin*.

It was noted that his home in Lukhokhwe village in Tongaren was used as a gathering place for many of the first converts. As of 2016, 200 members of TNJC had been converted from other denominations (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). By 2020, TNJC population had increased immensely to 500 congregants. In Lukhokhwe village in Tongaren, one out of four

people are members of TNJC. Out of children born within the year 2022 in this locality, 30% are members of TNJC making this movement fast growing by births (TNJC records, 2022).

Just like other AICs, TNJC leader and founder Wekesa was opposed to the doctrines and theology brought by the Western Christian missionary churches. By 2023, there is only one church of TNJC which forms its headquarters in Tongaren Bungoma County. Consequently, there are plans underway to expand the church due to its massive attraction from all parts of Kenya. As at 2023, the church's population is at about 1000 believers (TNJC records, 2023).

Challenges and Resilience of TNJC

During the beginning of his ministry in 2011, Wekesa, was met with opposition from both the people within his locality and the government officials. He disagreed with the Bungoma County officials over indoctrination. In 2012, Wekesa was accused by the Tongaren society of being blasphemous, leading to constant harassment, arrests, fines and imprisonment together with his followers (Wekesa, 2022). During the study, a member of TNJC claimed that "Their places of worship could be destroyed by the authorities to some extent" (oral interview, Barasa, June 9, 2022).

During this period, some members of TNJC were suspected of associating and helping their founder, Wekesa, in claiming to be Jesus Christ. Most probably, this was because Wekesa was a strong religious leader who claimed that he was the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth referring to himself as "Jesus of Tongaren." He has since then been referred to as *Yesu wa Tongaren* by his followers. The members of TNJC claim that they did not view their leader as a claim of being Jesus Christ but instead to them as a member of TNJC: "He is the true promised biblical Messiah who only came to fulfill the Old Testament Prophesies" (oral interview, Samweli, June 9, 2022).

It was mentioned during the study that in one incident, Wekesa was denied a permit to hold meetings, both private and public, by the local authorities. It was believed that he was exorcising people by the power of witchcraft claiming that he was the "Messiah." His leadership prowess was proven when he led TNJC members to the Bungoma Chief Magistrate in 2011 to seek formal permission to hold their meetings freely without Mukuyuni Police Administration interference (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022). His request was granted and made it possible for TNJC to hold church services and evangelistic meetings at Wekesa's home without fear of being arrested.

In 2023, Wekesa was arrested by a Bungoma Director of Criminal Investigation officer and placed in custody for five days. He was accused of the unlawful operation of an unregistered church, radicalization of his teachings which were termed offensive and against the law, and money laundering through church donations and compulsory tithes. Bungoma Principal Magistrate, Tom Orlando, later released him due to failure to provide sufficient evidence against him (Kirimi and Anyango, 2023).

Relationship between Members of TNJC and those of Other Religious Movements

The study acknowledges that TNJC is a 21st Century Christian NRM but they feel that they do not fit within the categories of Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant churches but they choose to remain separate from other Christian groups. They identify themselves with ecumenical movements such as the Pentecostal movements with whom they share common religious grounds (Wekesa, O.I, 2022, June 9). A concern for religious piety, peace and social justice often brings members of TNJC together with other churches and other Christian groups within Tongaren Sub-county in Bungoma County. Most adherents believe in continuing

God's revelation of truth. Wekesa claims:that "Christ has come to teach people Himself." (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022).

Precariously, diverse theological beliefs, understanding of the "manifestation of the Holy Spirit," and statements of "faith professions and practice of piety" have always existed among TNJC adherents. Too much emphasis is placed on guidance from the Holy Spirit. It came across during the study that members of this particular NRM believe that their religious thoughts and spiritual lives are based on the life and teachings of their founder, *Yesu wa Tongaren*, couched in biblical text.

Members of TNJC distance themselves from practices that seem to be worldly or pagan celebrations such as Christmas because they believe it is a pagan festivity. TNJC adherents call upon denominations within Tongaren to turn into the New Jerusalem which is TNJC, since it is the only gateway to Heaven. They believe that the state is an institution just like the family. The founder Wekesa, notes that "The issue of governance is well supported from the scripture through the roles played by judges, kings, priests and prophets (Deuteronomy 16:18-22). In a family, each individual is given different roles to play by God." (oral interview, Wekesa, June 9, 2022).

Just like kings and judges, members of TNJC believe that the government plays the same role by dispensing justice and protecting the vulnerable people in the society. Similarly, the church plays the prophetic role of being the conscience of the nation by proclaiming God's expectations and calling people back when they fall short of the same (Muthuku et al., 2023). Wekesa's respect for governance can be seen when he presented himself before the police in April of 2023 after they summoned to investigate him and his religion.

The study has demonstrated that members of TNJC believe that the role of the church as far as government is concerned is to equip God's people for works of public service in the various institutions in which God places them. The church's engagement with the government is not about the church members getting into elective positions, but rather about ordinary Christians bringing the Kingdom of God by doing His will forever and wherever they are. *Yesu wa Tongaren* aims at bringing people under his rule by establishing a new community of people with a whole new identity.

As stated earlier, at the time of this study, *Mwalimu Yesu* had one wife and seven children. His followers identify his wife as "The wife of the lamb" and have been religiously renamed as *Nabii Benjamin* while her children have names of the great prophets of the Bible. The wife is quite supportive to her husband's work and she believes that her husband is a true prophet. His believers get to see him perform miracles such as healing the critically ill people. It is claimed that she started her relationship with Wekesa after being commanded by a voice from Heaven, The wife said: "I ascended to the top of the mountain, where I discovered Mwalimu. I cannot express how grateful I am to have been selected out of all the ladies that live on this earth" (Khaemba, 2023)

Finally, Wekesa believes that because of the level of sin that exists in the world, only a small percentage of its eight billion inhabitants will be able to enter paradise. To him, he will only take 168,000 believers with him to Heaven (Khaemba, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has offered a glimpse of the context in which TNJC of Tongaren was established. It concludes that there is a deep history of TNJC. There is also a variety of factors responsible for the emergence of the church. It is sufficient to say, in conclusion, that TNJC members were more deeply and realistically concerned with their fellow members' social and spiritual wellness than political activity. TNJC movement engaged in politically-motivated social programs or government-initiated development projects with the goal of enhancing the

welfare of their constituents.

In order for a better society through the church as the Body of Christ, this study therefore recommends that, before any church is established, there must be clearly stated objectives why it must be founded and registered. The founder should clearly state why s/he wants to establish a church and how it would be able to contribute to the lives of the worshippers, both physically and spiritually. Lastly, it is important that there should be clear guidelines on how a church should be founded and how it will contribute to the area or community where the church is established. Therefore, some legal reforms should be made on the registration of churches to prevent future emergence of harmful or ill-intended NRMs such like the GNIM that is linked to the *Shakahola* massacre. This might in turn help to prevent suspicions that may arise from the challenges of the society through accusations.

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