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## **Contemporary Aesthetics of the Akurino: A Religion or a Cultural Movement?**

**Abstract:** This paper examines the aesthetics of the worship rituals, music, artifacts and the oral tradition of the Holy Ghost Church of East Africa, or Akurino religious sect, which is a unique blend of Christian religious practices and traditional African worship systems. The main question here is whether the Akurino are a Christian religious sect or a cultural movement? The Akurino are significantly interesting due to the fact that they claim to be an indigenous African Christian religion, among many such others. But the fact that they are mostly found in Central Kenya and the Rift Valley regions, and are confined among the Gikuyu people only and have not attracted adherents from other segments of society, raises the question as to whether they may not also be a cult or a cultural movement. The Akurino started appearing in the middle of the 1920s. They grew strictly out of indigenous leadership. Their first generation membership came out of various missions as well as the unchurched population that followed Gikuyu traditional religion. The group was in its infancy and was functioning in various parts of Gikuyu country, but had little influence with the general population, its appeal being to such individuals as had been pronounced ‘sinners’ by missionaries, and to others who had been cured of diseases.

**Keywords:** worship; song; dance; revival; Holy Spirit; fervor; sect; indigenous.

### **Introduction**

Since their first appearance in or around 1926, different names and titles have been used to refer to the Akurino.<sup>1</sup> Kenyatta spoke of a religious sect known as *Watu wa Mungu* [People of God] or *Arathi* [prophets]. The term *Watu wa Mungu* or *Arathi* implies that they were men and women who relayed God’s message to their people. The colonial administrative files of 1931 refer to them as ‘false prophets’. Another name used to refer to Akurino is *Aroti*. The name first appeared in the administrative files in February 1934. The name indicates the movement’s emphasis on dreams (*iroto*) and

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<sup>1</sup> The Gikūyū spelling for this word is Akūrinū. I use Akurino as an anglicised approximation while some of my sources like Philomena Njeri use Akurinu.

hearing (*migambo*). The name by which the adherents are to the present day commonly known is Akurino. The Akurino theology is basically Christian – mostly based on the Old Testament – but their theology is uniquely African. “It was an attempt to indigenize Christianity by integrating African value systems and morality into Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> It was also a reaction against the cultural and political imperialism implicit in the imposition of Christianity on the African. In his book, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, David Barret sees the growth of African independent churches as partly schism and partly renewal. He cites social, political and cultural factors as the causes of this schism. He particularly points out the mistreatment of Africans and the perceived distortion of Christianity by European missionaries as significant. Vittorio Lanterani views independent church movements as a manifestation of political, social, and economic discontent and frustration. F. B. Welbourn views the independent churches as an African attempt to form “a church tribe, someplace where among the debris of the old tribal life, still unassimilated to the west, Africans can feel at home.”<sup>3</sup> In this context then, it may be argued that the Akurino may be viewed as a Christian religious sect and as an anti-colonial cultural movement underpinned by Christian religion undertones and beliefs.

### The Akurino: A brief history

The Akurino emerged due to theological, social, political, economic, and cultural reasons. Theologically they found fault with missionary Christianity, particularly in its lack of emphasis on the Holy Spirit and His manifestations in dreams, visions and prophecy. They (the missionaries) also failed to uphold the Levitical laws of the Old Testament pertaining to food and relationship with God and one another. The Akurino claim that the Holy Spirit showed their sect how to read the Bible and from it, they created a liturgy, code of ethical behavior and a new spiritual community. In all these, the theological factor stands out as the most significant. The Akurino also experienced economic, social, political and cultural pressures like the rest of the population in colonial Kenya. But among the Gikuyu, they are the only religious group who took a form characterized by a great emphasis on the Holy Spirit. They withdrew from society and rejected everything foreign. They are even said to have built grass houses to avoid using roofing material from Europe. However, unlike the Karing'a movement, which adopted many aspects of Gikuyu cultural and religious traditions, the *Arathi* consciously adopted only three such traditions; namely: belief in *Ngai* [God], the idea of *Thahu* [ritual uncleanness] and the practice of prophecy. They still hold today, as before, that they are uninterested in any political involvement.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Philomena Njeri, “The Akurinu Churches: A study of the history and some of the basic beliefs of the Holy Ghost Church of East Africa, 1926–1980,” (Master of Arts thesis, University of Nairobi, 1984), 2, <http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/handle/11295/23812>, acc. January 15, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> F. B. Welbourn & B. A. Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home: A Study of Two Independent Churches in Western Kenya* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Njeri, “The Akurinu Churches,” 87.

## Akurino system of worship

The Azusa Street Revival was a historic religious revival meeting that took place in Los Angeles, California. It was led by William Seymour, an African American preacher. It began with a meeting on April 9, 1906, and continued until roughly 1915. The revival was characterized by spiritual experiences accompanied by testimonies of physical healing miracles, worship services, and speaking in tongues. Today, the revival is considered by historians to be the primary catalyst for the spread of Pentecostalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In central Kenya a ‘Pentecost’ happened in the 1920s whose provenance and the agency had no historical or theological connection with the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, California. That ‘Pentecost without Azusa’ gave rise to the *Arathi* [prophets] movement, which developed into what is now known as the Akurino church; an African indigenous church in Kenya. It is characterized by emotional repentance of sins accompanied by loud prayers and weeping. Central to that Pentecost is the doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues, dreams, visions and hearings, and a sustained healing ministry.<sup>5</sup>

Teachings about Christ are not prominent but the Holy Spirit features prominently over and above God the Father and the Son. This dominance of the Holy Spirit in their belief system has earned the Akurino labels like “People of the Spirit” [*Watu wa Roho*]. Up to today, the Akurino regard themselves as “friends of the Holy Spirit” [*Arata a Roho Muthuru*]<sup>6</sup> This Christian theology, influences their understanding of scripture, their relations with the rest of the world, and their participation in the life of their society.

An Akurino church service is suffused with an atmosphere of joy. Women and girls wear long white dresses. *Gacuka* [a sash], tied on a woman’s bust acts as a wedding ring.<sup>7</sup> The sash is, therefore, a useful attire in distinguishing a married Mukurino woman from unmarried ones. Women also put on white headdresses, which are usually called veils, to cover their hair. The sanctity of dressing continues to influence the Akurino way of life as well as creating a strong religious symbolism among the believers. The dress also acts as a marker as it separates the believers from the ordinary life or the profane world. Men and boys wear long white tunics. Men also wear white turbans while small boys wear white caps.

## Akurino song and dance

Hymns and songs form an integral part of the worship in all Akurino churches. The fervor, vigor and exuberance of Akurino music is captivating. Such is the intensity of feeling in their singing, drumming and foot-stomping that they are often

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Solomon Waigwa, “Pentecost without Azusa: An historical and theological analysis of the Akurino Church in Kenya (PhD diss., Waco, Texas, Baylor University, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Njeri, “The Akurino Churches,” 124.

<sup>7</sup> Waigwa, “Pentecost without Azusa.”

considered the ultimate showcase of the African spirit in song and dance. Even more captivating is the euphoric “high” that appears to grip them, raising their spirit and the tempo of the music to heights that can be dazzling to onlookers. There is a mystic factor to their songs and one feels filled with a supernatural element in the course of their performance; it is spellbinding. This research delves into the history and aesthetics of this indigenous Kenyan religion-cum-cultural movement and sheds light on its key pillars and the various rules and mores that guide their captivating spiritual music and the members’ unique lifestyle.

Every service usually starts with the hymn “God’s book is holy”. The singing is accompanied by drumming, clapping of hands and joyous dancing. “The clapping and rhythmic movements aid the repetition of whole songs or of the chorus and are also a means of expression of members joy and praise to the Lord.”<sup>8</sup> Through them, the feelings of the congregation can gradually rise to the point where they enter a trance and reach a state of ecstatic communion with God. The younger generation has however slightly modified Akurino music and given it a modern twist.

### **The character of Akurino music**

The character of Akurino music is based on their spiritualism which might sound unusual but not to sect members. According to Julia Lucy, the real Akurino compositions are revealed to the artists by the Holy Spirit in the form of dreams. She avers that this is the purest kind of music because it is revealed in its holistic nature with the lyrics and harmonies all delivered to the chosen one.

This sourcing is derived from their belief that music was originally straight from God and the artist was/is simply a messenger. “Our songs are a form of prayer and are most effective when derived from the dream” says Lucy. She also explains that the other type of songs are based on scripture reading or from sermons and have a more secular format in their composition but are still directly derived from the word of God. The drum is not a conventional rhythm or percussion instrument but has the objective of lifting the spirit of the musicians to hallucinatory levels so that they are able to communicate to God. “The theology of the Akurino church is found in their songs. Songs are used to transmit important messages and are part of their lives. The content in the songs embraces confessions and praises with the constant refrain of ‘Amen’, ‘Halleluiah’ and ‘praise God’. The drum is a powerful instrument of Akurino music. It is said that the more they beat the drum, the farther they keep the devil away.”<sup>9</sup>

There is a co-relation of Akurino music to the traditional chants by Gikuyu elders of old in their religious sacrifices. The Akurino base most of their beliefs on the Old Testament and blend them with Gikuyu traditions, which is reflected in their

<sup>8</sup> Njeri, “The Akurinu Churches,” 82.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Murigi Wanyoike, “The transformation of an African religious movement: A case of the Akurinu of Kandara Sub County in Murang’a County, Kenya, 1926–2000” (Master of Arts (History) thesis, Kenyatta University, October, 2016), 131.

music. They have their own unique music which has its roots in traditions of Gikuyu traditional religion. Their music, therefore, represents a Gikuyu cultural revival.

### Recording history

The Akurino were among the very first gospel musicians to record their music. The history of their recorded music began in 1972 when Milka Wairimu and Esther Wambui did their first recording with the Ofafa 1 choir. It was well-received mostly within the sect and a new genre of gospel music was born. Some of their hits were *Musa Erirwo Akahure*, *Guku Turi Muhuro Wa Riua*, *Kaa Nami*,<sup>10</sup> among others

At the time, most recordings were done live and studios were accustomed to an entire group performing together; but the Akurino were a completely new experience. The success of this maiden project paved the way for more recordings by different artists including Julia Lucy who is so far the enduring symbol of success in this realm. She opened a production house and music shop along Duruma road in Nairobi that became a meeting point for members of the sect and their gateway to the recording business.

Traditionally, Akurino shun publicity and it is difficult to get them to talk about their work and this may have perpetuated the misconceptions about their faith (as to whether they are a quasi-religious cultural movement) and their music. Their singing is spontaneous and their songs and the harmonies have very little influence from other genres of music except for the emerging younger generation of Akurino musicians such as Akurino De Band.

Younger Akurino artists are evolving and adapting to the use of keyboards and pop music influences. Gone are the days when Akurino were known for being reserved and conservative. The younger generation of musicians is incorporating modern music trends into traditional Akurino music. Their style of composition is different and is taking on a modern pop format that does not necessarily rely on dreams or scripture readings for their compositions; and which at times have nothing to do with religious themes but have modified Akurino rhythms and lyrics as a genre to amplify other themes such as love. This is reflected in the music of younger artists such as Hezekiah Ndung'u and Allan Aaron who draw appeal outside the sect with a dose of hip hop and pop structure to their music. The way the Akurino youth are participating in events like weddings and music performances is changing too, signaling a metamorphosis of the Akurino music in a revolutionary fashion. *Mukuri nuu?*, Kikuyu for 'Who is the Saviour?' by the trio Akurino De Band is just one of the new hit songs that have received huge viewership and airplay on local Kenyan vernacular TV and radio stations as well as on social media. (Notice the pun on the word *Mukurino* in the title of the song, which is how members of the Akurino church are called).

<sup>10</sup> *Musa Erirwo Akahure* is Gikuyu for *Moses Was Asked To Strike* while *Guku Turi Muhuro Wa Riua* is also Gikuyu for *Here We are Below The Sun*. *Kaa Nami* is Kiswahili for *Abide with Me*.

The song has a different style of composition, with a bias towards modern pop style. The music is changing and they even have replaced the solo drum with DJs. Perhaps it is a reflection of the bigger picture where the youth are venturing into politics, medicine, and banking, among other 'modern' fields. Their adopted stage names also reflect this new trend, such as Danny Gift, whose real name is Daniel Ng'ang'a, Peter P.K, Isaac, 'Izzoh' and Waweru, 'Wech'.

However, even with the modern younger musicians, there is still a certain character of their music that has been retained especially in the vocal style, that hymn-like delivery, which remains distinct from other forms of Kenyan music. The Akurino are well known for their production of spiritual hymns in the Gikuyu language.

The instrumentation is changing too. Initially, they used *ndarama* [drums] and *karing'aring'a* [metallic ring used as a musical instrument] but today they are now using drums sets and keyboards, thus adapting to the changing times.

### **Akurino artifacts**

The Akurino are the only religious sect known to have a museum. This, above all else, is what raises the question of whether they really are not a quasi religious-cultural movement. Their Peace Museum in Thika town began in 2000 with the aim of preserving and strengthening peace values among the Akurino. It started by documenting the history of the Akurino, collecting artifacts, photos of Akurino leaders who have been an inspiration to others on pacifism, and their biographies. The museum also identified a number of artifacts that are still held by the community because they are perceived as sacred and are exclusively worn during ceremonies. At the same time, some of the material in the exhibition (e. g. *gaarus* which is a multi-purpose hall constructed on every church campus) exist in Akurino indigenous churches and the best way to view them is by visiting the churches themselves and sharing experiences with the elders who advise that artifacts should not be moved from the community (this again is a cultural rather than a religious function). Other artifacts on display are the religious vestments that are used by all Akurino during services. One of the vestments is a white turban that is used to identify the Akurino as peacemakers. The turban is a band of cloth wrapped around the head several times into a neat head-dress. Women wear white headscarves and white ankle-length dresses. This unique dress code identifies all the Akurino people as peacemakers. Another vestment is the robe called *kanju*, from Kiswahili *kanzu*, which is used during church services. These vestments reflect the Aaronic priesthood which required every minister at the altar to wear priestly garments. By wearing priestly garments, all Akurino, both male and female, affirm that they are called to pray for peace for the country.

## Oral tradition

The name by which adherents are today mostly known by is Akurino. It is not certain when the term appeared; most likely it was in the 1940s. This term is given various interpretations and seems to be a coined word, for the word does not exist in the Gikuyu language other than in this context. Some “kurinu say the term is derived from the phrase *MUKURI-NU?* [who is the redeemer?].”<sup>11</sup>

Stories are told about exhibits at the museum because oral tradition goes hand in hand with the visual display. One such story is that of the *gacuka*, an adornment worn by married women. According to an unpublished document entitled *Rugano Rwa Githomo Kia Aroti*, ‘The Story of the Aroti Church’ (*Aroti* is another name for Akurino), some Akurino prophets heard the voice of God asking them to go for a prayer retreat on Mount Kenya, a sacred mountain for the Agikuyu, in 1927. Among them was a respected prophetess who displayed a unique spiritual charisma and was therefore accepted into the leadership of the early Akurino. On their way up the mountain, as they approached River Nyamindi, tradition says that God spoke to the prophetess about traditional adornments which they wore. God impressed on her that for a servant of God, the acceptable adornment was that of the inner person, and excessive jewelry was an indication of worldliness. The prophetess told the group that God had instructed them to discard all their jewelry into the River Nyamindi, which they promptly did. They had to leave all worldliness behind before they crossed River Nyamindi on their ascent to the Holy Mountain to hear the voice of God. The removal of their cultural ornaments and adornments represented a turning away from their earlier traditional life in order to cross over into a new life in the Spirit. Following that instruction, personal ornaments, such as necklaces, rings, bracelets, jewelry and other adornments of precious metal were forbidden among the Akurino. Only recently have some Akurino begun to wear wedding bands.

The Akurino regard *Mukurwe wa Nyagathanga* the birthplace of the Gikuyu nation and Mt. Kenya as their holy shrine. In this way, they fuse traditional Gikuyu cultural beliefs with their brand of Christianity. The Akurino are led by elders rather than by bishops and priests, as is the norm in mainstream Christian churches. This again is directly borrowed from the traditional Gikuyu system of governance thus reinforcing the quasi-religious cultural movement argument.

The museum has photographs of *Gaaru*, and stories are told about the origin of *Gaaru*. The idea of a *Gaaru* is traditionally Ameru in origin, where young warriors lived together in large buildings called *Gaaru*<sup>12</sup> where they underwent rigorous training in military methods and social responsibility. The *Gaaru* itself was an extended hut where warriors ate their meals and slept. Within the *Gaaru* was a kitchen space and storage facilities for their belongings. The Akurino adopted the *Gaaru* barrack as a church facility to be used for various activities. It proved to be a great innovation, especially because

<sup>11</sup> Njeri, “The Akurinu Churches,” 23.

<sup>12</sup> Waigwa, “Pentecost without Azusa.”



it allows church members to meet in an informal manner and learn from each other. *Gaarus* are also very useful in providing accommodation for traveling evangelists, pastors, and prophets who frequent the church community. There are separate *Gaarus* for males and females, with the *Gaarus* for females doubling as a kitchen as well. Informal services are held in the *Gaarus* designated for males. During such meetings, females are allowed into them. During the Mau Mau Uprising and the violent struggle for independence, *Gaarus* were a refuge to many Akurino who were severely persecuted for joining the pacifist faith group while others were made outcasts by their village communities for refusing to support the Mau Mau movement. On joining the *Gaarus*, they were provided with food, shelter and clothing by fellow pacifists.

Another notable artifact is a white bag hung over the shoulders of Akurino elders during services, and especially during Church ceremonies (*magongona*). Inside the bag is religious literature. The sanctity of the contents of the bag warrants its handling with honor and reverence; since therein are documents of the doctrine and practice of the Akurino as a community of faith and worship.

Akurino music is another component that the museum aims to preserve. The Akurino are well known for their production of spiritual hymns in the Gikuyu language. The hymns use typical African tunes and melodies which reach deep into the African psyche, causing the hearer to draw near and listen to the message. Their music is sung in deep and loud sounds using African drums, and other percussive instruments for accompaniment.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The beliefs and practices of the Akurino were derived from both the Bible and the Gikuyu religious heritage and have undergone changes since 1926. This unique blend of Christian and traditional African systems of worship is what gives Akurino religious aesthetics their unique characteristics. The Akurino are a relatively new religious movement or alternative spirituality. As a religious or spiritual group, they have modern origins but are peripheral to their society's dominant religious culture. They are significantly interesting due to the fact they are an indigenous African Christian religion – unlike the missionary-inspired denominations – but their practices and the fact that all members are from the Gikuyu community also gives the appearance of a cultural movement. Due to this indigenization, the Akurino churches provide a type of Christianity that is relevant to them. They have adapted it to their indigenous situation and hence created a community where they feel psychologically and spiritually at home. The merging of Christian and African belief systems has resulted in the birth of a new aesthetics which bears the hallmarks of both Christian and African value systems yet is unique in its own way. The Akurino religion displays a sense of commitment to the community that is reminiscent of the traditional Gikuyu religion

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Gachanja, "The Pacifist Presence in Kenya," <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/ferguson-centre/projects/managing-heritage/events-17>, acc. January 10, 2020.



and community. This can be seen in the way they worship, in their music and in their oral tradition. The centrality of this strong sense of community can also be seen in personal relationships. The principles of mutual responsibility, honesty, sharing, love and kindness permeate the Akurino community. As Jocelyn Murray observes, the Akurino have created a “church tribe”, where mutual help apparently expresses the interdependence of the group members and where spiritual kinship replaces blood and age-set<sup>14</sup> relationships found in traditional Gikuyu society. This spiritual kinship is reinforced as well by the desire to maintain wholeness in both communal relationships and in their relationship with God. This desire for wholeness is well expressed in the concept of *Thahu* which is defined as “ritual uncleanness [...] generally incurred through the performance, voluntary or involuntary, of certain acts, some of which are inevitable in everyday life.”<sup>15</sup> This concept dominates the life of the Akurino, just as it did that of the Gikuyu. Given all the foregoing, it would be safe to argue that the Akurino are not only an indigenous African Christian sect, but they do also bear the hallmarks of a cultural movement.



Figure 1: **De Band**, <https://mdundo.com/news/> (public domain).

<sup>14</sup> Age-set or age-grade is an English approximation of *riika*. This Gikuyu word refers to a collective as it goes through the various life cycle stages e.g. a group of more-or-less agemates who go through initiation, at roughly the same time or season, marking the end of childhood and beginning of teenagehood or commencing adulthood by assuming roles like junior elders, or being promoted to seniority with the consequent duties of keeping and guarding both family and community norms.

<sup>15</sup> Waigwa, “Pentecost without Azusa.”



Figure 2: **Dancing like David**, <https://www.musicinafrica.net/> (public domain).



Figure 3: **Praise and Worship**, <http://cyberspaceandtime.com> (public domain).



Figure 4: Akurino song and dance, <http://cyberspaceandtime.com> (public domain).

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