

# GOING TO CANAAN: Biblical Identification in Kenya Political Discourse

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**Abstract:** During the latest political campaign in Kenya, both political blocks used religious metaphors to explain their aims and attract political support. Legislators know that they cannot do without religious support. They also make conscious decisions to use religious themes to their advantage. Politicians readily identify with biblical characters and event, knowing that these have a strong appeal on people. Religious leaders should clarify their position. They are not called to support one or the other side, but they can intervene and explain the real meaning of biblical images and the hazard in using sacred iconology out of context. Moreover, they could take the initiative and support political choices that move away from political gains and focus the nation on the choices needed for real development and a social transformation that interests all the citizens.

**Keywords:** Biblical Images, Kenya, Political Expediency, Religious Identity, Religious Leader, Social Transformation.

## 1. Introduction

The interaction of politics and religion in Kenya has been investigated by various authors. Yet, much remains unnoticed, unknown or not sufficiently explained. In a particular way, little is being said about the role of religious leaders and the citizenry facing the use of religious paradigms and imagery by politicians. This paper analyzes the use of biblical imagery in the Kenyan political discourse during the political campaign leading to the 2017 general elections and suggests possible responses to the haphazard use of religious themes and imagery by unscrupulous politicians. The paper briefly traces the relationship between

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religion and politics in Kenya since independence, makes a deeper analysis of this relationship during the latest political campaign, and proposes ways of engagement of religious leaders and bodies with politicians.

The engagement of religious leaders, and of religious institutions, with the political discourse at national level could create the opportunity for a much needed change. In the past, the churches and Islam did engage in a political confrontation with the then dictator Daniel Toroitich arap Moi. Then it was the question of finding ways for liberation and democracy. Today, it would be the case of shaping truly democratic structures. The present process of devolvement of powers risks a needless shift of powers from the central to county governments. With powers, all the ills of corruption, mismanagement, lack of transparency, among others, also shift to county level. In real terms, the present exercise of devolvement has achieved very little. A challenge can be put before religious leaders, for they hold the key to involve their communities in awareness campaigns, thus offering the tools people need to face the political world, asking the right questions and expecting a new set of answers.

A further aim of this paper is to challenge the status quo, asking politicians to review the way they portray themselves, but also how they define their persona facing the challenges of society.

## **2. Religion and Politics in Kenya**

In Kenya, the spiritual world - in all its intricacy - is intimately part of society and national self-perception. Various studies have shown that Kenyan religiosity is not reflected in a true participation in religious life.<sup>1</sup> In reality – as far as participation in organized religion goes - most Kenyans live a secular life. At the same time, it is evident that Kenyans perceive themselves as religious people and the majority of citizens are ready to swear they belong to a God-fearing country, and a Christian country at

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<sup>1</sup>Aylward Shorter, *Secularism in Africa: A Case Study, Nairobi City*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997.

that.<sup>2</sup> The Bible has a strong influence on people, not only on Christians. It is no surprise, then, that any public meeting must include prayers and blessings. No public gathering would forego a blessing on the proceedings and on food.

The political world is not immune of this approach to religiosity. Religious themes, use of the Bible, religious imagery, prayers and blessings, church-like rhetoric, all have been part of the political life of the country since independence. Presidents Kenyatta and Moi often portrayed themselves as church elders.<sup>3</sup> President Toroitich arap Moi used his membership in the African Inland Church, and his closeness to the Evangelical groups, to promote himself as the rightful leader of the nation.<sup>4</sup> Today's politicians are no less involved in the use, and manipulation, of religious feelings to enhance their own status among their followers.

During the latest political campaign leading to the August 8, 2017 elections – and the presidential re-run in November of the same year – two biblical images were used by the opposition and government's political blocks. Mr Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement, and presidential candidate of the National Super Alliance coalition, moved the crowds telling them that they were like the Jewish runaway slaves marching towards Canaan. He, new Joshua, would lead them into the Promised Land and thus conquer the freedom which eluded Kenyans for many decades. The Jubilee camp – the party in power that had earlier absorbed all member parties of the alliance which won the 2012 elections – responded comparing their leader, President Uhuru Kenyatta, to King David.

Odinga played on his image as a man always fighting the power that be, a liberator, struggling for the good of the people.

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<sup>2</sup>Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, "2009 Population & Housing Census Results" <<http://www.knbs.or.ke>> County Statistics> (11 June 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Gideon Githiga, *The Church as the Bulwark Against Authoritarianism*, Oxford: Regnum International, 2001.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Politics and Public Life in Kenya*, London: Hurst & Co., 2009, 15.

It was not a new scheme of thought in Kenyan politics.<sup>5</sup> Kenyatta's supporters claimed that their leader – who is left handed and likes music – could be compared to King David who liked music – many Psalms are ascribed to him – and most probably was left-handed. That was explained with a verse from the book of *Judges*: “among Benjamin's elite troops, 700 were left-handed, and each of them could sling a rock and hit a target within a hairsbreadth without missing” (20:16). Since King Davis was also an expert slinger, they reasoned, he must have been left-handed too. President Kenyatta had the advantage of being a rain maker, and a prophet. During a visit to Nyeri on January 20, 2017, the crowds urged the sitting president to pray for rain. Kenyatta reluctantly accepted and prayed: “*Ngai witunitwakuhoia, Utuhethayobururiniwitu* (Our God, we pray, give us peace in our country), give us rain so that our animals can get something to eat, our land be productive, we eat and get strength...” goes the prayer. And according to the residents, after three minutes “God answered his prayers and it rained.”<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Roots of the Problems

The religious imagery used by political contenders during the 2017 electoral campaign rests its foundations on real needs of the Kenyan community. The country experienced a relatively short colonial period, which however grew increasingly harsh in the years preceding independence. After independence, many political and social issues stemming from the colonial times were buried under the carpet. The first President, Jomo Kenyatta (1964-1978), chose to freeze any decision regarding land distribution, thus perpetuating the state of injustice created during colonial times. At the same time, those close to political game-makers were rewarded with extensive lands and other

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<sup>5</sup>R. F. Otieno, F. Owino, Miguda J. Attyan, and J. O. Ogone, “Image Schemas in Political Discourse in Kenya,” *European Journal of Research in Social Sciences* Vol. 5, 2, 2017.

<sup>6</sup>J. Muraya, “He Prayed and It Rained,” *Nation*, 22 January 2017 <<http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Religion-and-politics-in-Kenya/1064-4122182-9hvxagz/index.html>> (10 May 2017).

perks. His successor, Daniel Toroitich arap Moi (1978-2002), continued on the same line and used his powers to reward or punish political and financial partners. Once again, land was used as one of the main currencies of patronage.

With the establishment of multi-party democracy, and Moi's retirement from active political life, the nation hoped to see their woes redressed. Kenyans expected land reforms and a new level of representativeness in the political arena. In particular, many wished to see an end to the Central Kenya-Rift Valley political alliance and a real re-distribution of resources, political and financial powers. The Central Kenya-Rift Valley political alliance – still active today – has meant that two major ethnic groups – the Kikuyu-Meru-Embu and the Kalenjin<sup>7</sup> – have been in control of all aspects of political and financial life in Kenya, leaving the crumbs to other groups who feel marginalized in spite of their numerical strength and the resources present in their ancestral lands.

A second issue is that of corruption. Kenya is notorious for its level of dishonesty and crafty deals at all levels. Citizens have both being part of this system and oppressed by it. With the event of democracy, Kenyans hoped for a change, which did not materialize.

During Moi's era, Christian institutions chose different strategies to face political challenges. The mainline churches – Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran – worked together both in awareness campaigns among the people and in publicly opposing the dictator. Some of the Evangelical churches

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<sup>7</sup>The Kikuyu are the largest ethnic group in Kenya and they originally inhabited the central region of the country, they are now spread nationwide, especially in the Rift Valley. Embu and Meru are smaller ethnic groups, also from Central Kenya, which have traditionally joined the Kikuyu to achieve clout in political and financial affairs. The Kalenjin are a loose coalition of ethnic groups not always culturally and linguistically related. However, since they share the Rift Valley environment, they have been grouped together and thus they remain to have a stronger influence on the affairs of the country.

supported Moi's regime in exchange of financial benefits. Most Islamic leaders opposed president Moi and his policies. This fragmentation was used by Moi to hang on to power, but did not impede the growth of a new awareness among the citizenry. In particular, mainline churches acquired a moral high-ground that Moi and his cronies could not shake off.

With the election of President Emilio Mwai Kibaki (2002-2013), an economist by profession and a declared Catholic, the churches retreated from the public arena. Bishops kept writing pastoral letters touching on social issues, yet de facto avoided harsh judgements on the new political dispensation. Instead, most religious leaders sought ways to receive patronage from the political establishment either for their institution's needs or for personal benefit.

#### **4. Use of Images**

Identification with biblical events and characters during the political campaign leading to the 2017 general elections must be seen against this background. Kenyans, especially those belonging to ethnic or social groups feeling marginalized by the establishment, expected a sort of liberation. They wished for a political leader who could and would take their plight and act on reforms that would include them in the national political, economic, and cultural discourse. Odinga did exactly that. His pounding on the 'going to Canaan' theme strung a cord in people's subconscious. Odinga's promise of a liberation appealed to them, even though – or perhaps because of - it contained the seed of a struggle. Also, Odinga portrayed himself as a political figure who always was by the side of the people, who suffered on the hand of the powers controlling the country, and so held the moral right to become the next president - liberator of Kenya.

In the other political camp, President Kenyatta did not directly applied biblical imagery to himself. However, there is little doubt that such icons used by his entourage were approved at higher level. Accepting to be depicted as King David offered the subliminal message that he was in power to stay, kings are

for life. Kenyatta certainly played the part of the political leader who claimed the right to his position – he is son of the first president of Kenya – but also the right to choose his successor. Repeatedly indicating his deputy – William Ruto, a member of the Kalenjin community – as his successor, Kenyatta emphasized the continuity of the Central Kenya/Rift Valley political union.

The 'new Joshua' and the 'new King David' images share some features. While these images answer to felt needs, thus appealing to people in both camps, they are also self-centred icons, serving mainly the politician's interest of the moment. Political supporters in both camps claim that their leader is a person dedicated to the people, with no personal interest but the greater good of the nation. They unequivocally state that their front-runner wishes only the best for others. This stand is to be expected, but certainly not accepted without probe.

As a case in point is the aftermath of the 2017 Kenya elections. After a long campaign, when the contenders spared no insult and malignity against their opponents, the Kenyan political scenery suddenly found a new stability. President Kenyatta and Mr Odinga held talks which resulted in a truce that has being since referred to as the "handshake".<sup>8</sup> Odinga accepted to change his stance in exchange of a semi-official recognition of his political action. He claimed to be acting to overcome division and polarization. Kenyatta underlined the importance of collaboration with all forces in society. Political commentators hinted that the handshake worked well for Odinga, certainly not for other opposition leaders. In reality, Odinga acquired only the pretence of power sharing, thus giving him the opportunity to claim that government forces had to buckle facing the strength of the opposition, but no real say in the running of the country. On the other side of the divide, with the handshake Kenyatta reshuffled political cards, neutralizing the strongest voice in the opposition and hinting to his deputy

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<sup>8</sup>Nation, "Team Reveals Agenda of Uhuru Kenyatta, Raila Odinga Handshake," 30 April 2018 <<https://www.nation.co.ke/news/National-healing-to-top-agenda-of-Uhuru-Raila-team/1056-4536696-sr3ek0z/index.html>> (1 May 2018).

that his succession could be at risk, thus confirming himself as the real kingmaker able to outplay enemies and friends.

An observer is left to ask what happened to the imagery of struggle and salvation, of leadership and guidance. It is clear that, as soon as biblical references were no longer needed for political expediency, they were discarded. Being self-centred icons, politicians used them as long as they needed them. Once they abandoned them, they revealed those images for what they were: a subterfuge useful to acquire personal benefit and nothing more.

These biblical images not only are for the personal benefit of leaders, they are also based on wrong interpretations of the biblical texts. Few biblical scholars today would support a strictly historical understanding of the *Exodus* and conquest of Canaan saga. The flight from Egypt and crossing of the desert theme have come to serious scrutiny in the past decade.<sup>9</sup> The historicity of *Joshua* is no longer tenable by serious archaeologists and Bible scholars. The whole story has a profound theological meaning. It functions well as foundation myth and offers a path to identity. A similar reasoning can be done about King David. There is much debate about David's existence and action, let alone his being a righteous king.<sup>10</sup> The Bible itself portrays David in both his grandeur and his levity and sinfulness. It would have been easy for religious leaders to remind politicians that the icons they chose were not exactly spot on.

We should not forget that these two images were not the only religious motif used in the political arena in the wake of the elections. Both sides of the political divide moved from church to church – and the occasional mosque – to seek approval and political support. One journalist commented how

President Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto, who are seeking re-election, must be suffering from sore knees, as

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<sup>9</sup>Israel Finkelstein, Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*, New York: Free Press, 2001.

<sup>10</sup>Dietrich W. Walter, *The Early Monarchy in Israel: the Tenth Century B.C.E.*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007, 105ff.



they have moved from church to church kneeling before men of God, who lay hands on them and give them the anointing. Mr Ruto has been at the centre of a spiritual storm as leaders of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God try to interpret what his recent donation of 10 million Kenyan Shillings could mean. Some say it was gift for the development of the church, while others argue it was a political tithe to sway them to vote for his Jubilee Party.<sup>11</sup>

Odinga and his colleagues were no different.

The use of emotional references to biblical themes might be harmless in the mind of politicians, yet it is dangerous. History has proved times and again that 'religious' feelings may easily flare up in fully fledged violence and may result in bloody confrontations. Kenya is not new to this kind of violence. It is enough to remember the many religious based terror attacks suffered by Kenyans in the past decade. It is also important not to forget the violence of the 1990s, when some evangelical churches sided with then President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi thus endorsing State-run violence on citizens.<sup>12</sup> The use of religious motifs in the political arena will always happen. However, religious leaders have a duty to intervene and clarify matters. They should not join the political debate to support either side, but they can explain the dangers in using biblical imagery out of context and, especially, following popular interpretation, so often off the mark.

How, then, did religious leaders respond to this arbitrary use of these images? I could not find any official statement by any church prior to the elections that addressed this particular aspect. In the local media, priests, pastors and scholars commented on the appropriateness or less of such behaviour. Yet, none of these could speak on behalf of a recognized religious group. Given that churches have no monopoly on the

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<sup>11</sup>Nation, "How the Bible Rules Kenyan Politics," 3 October 2017, <<https://mobile.nation.co.ke/news/politics/Religion-and-politics-in-Kenya/3126390-4122182-1111u18/index.html>> (11 October, 2017).

<sup>12</sup>Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Politics and Public Life in Kenya*, London: Hurst & Co., 2009.

Bible, it could be safely argued that religious leaders have a duty to safeguard an appropriate way to read and interpret the text, at least to form awareness amongst their faithful. This would include the explanation of the right meaning of biblical texts.

The issue is not, of course, limited to religious leaders. Politicians themselves should question their peers who use religious thoughts and feelings to sway political support. The risk is that, by remaining bystanders, politicians would give ground for the radicalization of their followers. In Kenya radicalization is often a label attached to Islamic groups. In reality, there are other groups with strong religious views which also use violence and other criminal acts against persons to achieve their goals. In the past years, we have seen the rise of groups like the *Mungiki*. These are religious-based groups that easily turn to territorial control and crime, like in the case of the *Kinkonkoro* (Kisii) and *Abamanyi* (Maasai). In Kenya, there are more than one hundred banned groups that would fall into this category.<sup>13</sup>

In the case of the *Mungiki* it is easily seen how religion – in this case the purportedly Kikuyu traditional religion – is used to justify the return to ancestral practices, even if now outlawed like female genital mutilation, and the use of violence on anyone who does not agree with the *Mungiki*'s policies.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. The Way Ahead

The mixing of religion and politics in Kenya is inevitable. The idea that religious leaders may present a united front against politicians who use religion to their advantage is also wishful thinking. However, there are some possible lines of action that

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<sup>13</sup>Victor Matara, "Full List of 114 Outlawed Groups and Gangs in Kenya," <<https://victormatara.com/list-of-outlawed-dangerous-groups-and-gangs-in-kenya/>> (31 January 2018).

<sup>14</sup>Margaret G. Gecaga, "Religious Movements of Democratization in Kenya: between the Sacred and the Profane," in *Kenya: The struggle for Democracy*, G. R. Muruga, and S. W. Nasong'o, eds., London: Zed Books, 2007.

could prevent the use of religious thoughts and feelings to lead to violence.

In the past, the Churches have been able to guide political activism and direct it towards the common good without falling into the traps of political activism. The Ufungamano Initiative – where Christians, Muslim and Hindus converged to support popular resistance against the then President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi - is perhaps the most known case.<sup>15</sup> The initiative had also the merit to prevent mainstream politicians from using religious themes and actions. The involvement of religious leaders and activists belonging to religious groups in the process that led to the drafting of a new Constitution in 2004 – at times known as *Bomas Process* - is another example of how churches' involvement may help refrain the wrong use of religious imagery and understanding.<sup>16</sup>

A second path is educating political leaders to avoiding inflammatory remarks. This can be done by both punishing offenders, thus putting an end to the prevailing culture of impunity, and by helping them rediscover the values attached to religious feelings. In a recent political meeting in Western Kenya,<sup>17</sup> the convener asked people to come and praise God for the many blessings and successes he had in political activities. The prayer – which was there and was strongly felt by participants – slowly turned into a political rally. Only the continuous presence of church leaders prevented its turning into a fiery political debate. When a bystander asked the convener if

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<sup>15</sup>Jacob Mwathi Mati, "Social Movements and Socio-Political Change in Africa: the Ufungamano Initiative and Kenyan Constitutional Reform Struggles (1999-2005)," *Voluntas, International Journal of Voluntary and Non-profit Organizations*, Vol. 23, March 2012, 63-84.

<sup>16</sup>Katiba Digital Resource Database <<http://www.katibainstitute.org/Archives/index.php/ckrc-process/about-the-ckrc-process>> (10 May, 2018).

<sup>17</sup>The meeting took place in Kiminini and the author is a witness of the proceedings.

it were the case to let the bishop go, the answer was “no, lest the political leaders would easily turn to provocative remarks.”

Civil society has also a role in educating citizens in the right use of religious feelings. Kenyans are naturally religious, and easily accept ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ reasoning. Yet, there is little criticism on their part towards anyone purportedly passing on a religious message. This is why politicians find it easy to masquerade their plotting behind the smoke and screens of religion, biblical imagery, and spiritual insights. There is need for a greater ability, from the side of the public, to detect the trickery and question the veracity of certain remarks. No one denies the importance of religious ideas and feelings, yet it would be important to educate the public to discern true religious concerns from the abuse of religious ideas to favour one or the other political side.

Ultimately, the question rests with religious leaders. Even though religion and spirituality are not to be confined within the narrow comprehension of religious establishments, it is clear that religious leaders have important roles to play. They are seen as the competent people who can have decisive views on these matters.

History has proved time and again that ‘religious’ feelings may easily flare up in fully fledged violence and may result in bloody confrontations. Religious leaders have a duty to intervene and clarify matters. They should not join the political debate to support either side, but they can explain the dangers in using biblical imagery out of context and following popular interpretations, so often off the mark.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper tried to highlight some aspects of the use of religious themes by Kenyan politicians and leaders during political campaigns. The analysis is incomplete, for it did not take into consideration the numerous activities dealing with religiosity, for instance participation in religious ceremonies, addressing religious gatherings, receiving special blessings and ‘commissioning’, among others. Yet, the focus on a specific use

of biblical imagery allowed the underlining of important features.

Kenyan party leaders have shown an interest in depicting themselves along biblical imagery. They project their identity as mirroring that of important biblical people as a way to describe themselves as worthy of following. However, this is not true of all political leaders in Kenya. Not all Kenyan politicians use religion to capitalize for political expediency. In a recent research,<sup>18</sup> Kenyan Members of Parliament acknowledged that they regularly visit groups of various denominations every Sunday. Interestingly, only 25.8% of the respondents stated they participated in liturgies of people other than their religious group for political interest only. A larger group, 60.2%, claimed they went to visit other religious groups to pray with them, thus implying a sincere participation in a religious activity. Of the sample (n=140), 18 respondents (14.1%) specified that even when they pray with people of other faiths or different denominations, they must attend a liturgy of their own religious background. The latter group signalled at least a strong sense of identification, if not a penchant for radical views on religious matter.

All in all, these answers point to Members of Parliament who value their religious experience and do not necessarily pursue political mileage when participating in religious activities. Of course, the answers afforded by a cluster cannot be adapted to each single member of the group, thus these answers say very little when referred to the leaders of political coalitions.

A second consideration is the realization that Kenyan political leaders are willing to define their persona in relation to the expectations of people. On the one side, this is predictable. They wish to receive support and so they need to be seen as answering specific needs. On the other side, this raises the question if Kenyan political leaders are capable, and willing, to

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<sup>18</sup>Giuseppe Caramazza, *Influence of Religious Ideologies and Religious Leaders on Politicians' Ethical and Transformative Choices with Special Reference to Kenyan Members of Parliament*, Nairobi: Unpublished Dissertation, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2017, 108.

propose a journey, the adherence to specific values, in other words if they are ready to define their parties not because of the power-base but because of ideals. Unfortunately, the observation of political parties in Kenya today shows that they are rooted mainly on ethnic-economic divisions, not on vision and ideals.

This paper might be important also for religious bodies in that it challenges their present lack of initiative in the political arena. In the past, Kenyan churches and mosques were the hub of social transformation. Religious leaders promoted civic education at all levels and practically supported the movement to transform society through awareness campaigns that forced the political powers to give answers. It was done in the past, it can be done today, albeit with a new fine-tuning that takes into consideration the great social changes the country underwent through.