
Swallowed in his love

A look at how the mother-tongue Scriptures shed light on an age-old rite of passage among the Tharaka people of Kenya ¹

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Laughter filled the air as the young woman responded to my husband's Ki-Tharaka name. "So you've been swallowed!" she exclaimed. Our questioning faces gave us away—we had no idea what she was talking about.

"What does that mean?" we asked innocently. The only response to our question was more laughter.

In January 2002, six Wycliffe personnel were invited to work among the Tharaka people of central Kenya to help promote the use of the newly-translated New Testament, a cooperative project between Bible Translation & Literacy in Kenya, The Seed Company, and the Tharaka translation team. The New Testament had just been completed in August 2001. Our task, along with the Tharaka translation team, was to assess the current use of the New Testament and develop and implement strategies designed to enhance its use.

My husband was given the name Ntamitugo by a trusted friend after we had lived in Tharaka for about three months. The meaning of the name is "one who is upright and has integrity," but it also indicates that he has been "swallowed," or initiated into Tharaka culture. We wondered what this "swallowing" thing was all about, and why people were so nervous to talk about it. We had heard reports or stories about young boys being swallowed. Yet, not wanting to offend, or make anyone feel uncomfortable, we held off with our burning questions, and waited for the right time and the right person to share in detail about this secretive rite of passage. Soon a Tharaka teammate of ours brought up the topic of swallowing, although he had never been through the initiation; his insights were helpful, but we wanted to know more. Then the day came when a good Tharaka friend opened up to us about his swallowing experience, and shared freely about one of the most challenging and fearful experiences of his life.

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Swallowing, rooted in witchcraft, is the first rite of passage a Tharaka boy between the ages of 10 and 15 will go through on his journey to becoming a man. This event is done in submission to an evil spirit called Kirimo. According to Tharaka tradition, Kirimo was cast out of heaven long ago and “landed” on earth near a waterfall in Tharaka. He now resides in the rivers or near waterfalls, causing some Tharaka people (wa-Tharaka) to fear going near such places. Kirimo has been described to us as a monster with one foot who makes terrifying noises with the help of a “horn.”

Swallowing is a very important ceremony to wa-Tharaka and typically precedes circumcision, usually by about a year. If a Tharaka boy misses the swallowing event for some reason, even if he is later allowed to be circumcised, he still must go back to be swallowed.

About twice a year, young boys in the same age group will be gathered to be swallowed. According to the young men we spoke with, the boys are taken by older men to a secluded area near a river for approximately five days. During this period, the boys are beaten relentlessly and taught how to be mischievous. They learn about Kirimo’s evil ways and the language he speaks, which is similar to a secret code unknown to the uninitiated. This new language consists mostly of lies and insults, but also renames common objects in order to confuse women and perpetuate the belief that Kirimo has changed the boys in some way. The boys are told to learn this special language and behave in the way Kirimo would. Lying to women is especially encouraged. Attributing natural occurrences to Kirimo is also taught. For example, when wind drives away clouds on a cloudy night, it is said that Kirimo has licked the clouds away. This is also meant to frighten women and perpetuate the myth of Kirimo.

On the day of swallowing, the candidates are made to confess their sins in front of the elders and other boys. They tell all that they have done, especially if they have had any sexual relationship with any girl or have seen any naked woman. The purpose of this is to embarrass the boys and reveal their experiences. At this stage, they are told Kirimo is refusing to swallow them because they have not revealed everything. So this forces them to try and remember anything else they have done or make up stories. When those leading them into confession are sure that all has been confessed, the boys are shown a horn-like object made out of wood which is about six feet long. The boys are then allowed to huddle around the object, and this is what is called swallowing. A variation to this is that the boys are taken to the river and beaten, and while Kirimo’s saliva (water) is poured on them they are told that Kirimo is swallowing them.

One friend who shared his experience closed his eyes and looked like he was in pain as he recalled being beaten, spit on, and screamed at. He said he was delirious (he had not been allowed to eat or drink for at least 24 hours) and truly felt like he was being enveloped by a monster. He said it was horrifying.

Songs in praise of Kirimo are sung every night during the initiation period. Kirimo cannot accept any boy without a sacrifice; therefore, a goat is always killed for each group of the boys to be swallowed. Afterwards there is a large feast celebrating the swallowing initiation. The boys are returned to their families and expected to implement what they have learned during their initiation period.

Women are forbidden from attending or knowing about the ceremony, with extreme consequences for any woman who does. In the event that a woman happens upon the initiation, even by accident, she is first raped and then taken to a remote area to be killed so that she will never reveal the secret. The “monster” Kirimo is then blamed to explain away her death.

The consequences of revealing Kirimo’s true identity can be devastating. The elders threaten the boys by telling them that they will grow a horn on their head if they reveal the truth about Kirimo. In the event that any one member of a particular family is suspected to have revealed Kirimo’s secrets, the men would then gather themselves in a huge mob and invade the home, burn everything in that home and declare that Kirimo has swallowed it. This, of course, is meant to create more fear.

In fact, the initiation itself is designed solely to create fear within the Tharaka culture. Tharaka people live their lives bound to what they know of Kirimo. From the manner in which women are treated by men, to understanding why the sky is cloudless at night, a wide range of beliefs and behaviors stem from the ongoing false teachings of Kirimo.

Several Tharaka men shared their swallowing stories with us; some were believers, others, not. Their reflections helped us see the Tharaka culture in a different light and understand some of the reasons why Tharaka people behave in certain ways, like women not wanting to be out late at night because Kirimo might catch them, or a young boy leaving a room when his mother enters so they won’t be near each other.

Furthermore, according to many Tharaka leaders we talked to, the practice of swallowing perpetuates harmful cultural beliefs and behaviors such as wife abuse, child abuse, witchcraft, female circumcision, rivalry, theft, disobedience towards parents, lying, and sexual promiscuity.

The reality of Kirimo and the fear so easily observed within the culture demanded our attention as a Scripture Use team. But how were we to tackle such a deep-seated and sensitive subject with the Tharaka church leaders we were training? Even the Tharaka leaders with whom we worked voiced concern at discussing the issue at pastor training workshops.

In His goodness, God had brought to us these Tharaka Christians who were open about swallowing and were looking for ways to reveal the truth about Kirimo to their communities. One opportunity took place when some church leaders asked one of our team members, Jake, to address the issue at a local church service. The leaders themselves were uneasy about opening up the subject to a mixed congregation, so they felt that it was better for an outsider to bring it up!

Jake introduced the subject first by stating that Satan, the father of lies, has his own District Commissioner in Tharaka. This District Commissioner has been encouraging people to spread lies, speak poorly of women, and has even been encouraging children to disobey their parents. Immediately people wanted to know who this commissioner was! How could he be spreading lies, speaking poorly of women or encouraging young men to disobey their parents? What a horrible commissioner! Jake then asked if anyone knew who the commissioner was. Nobody

answered, there was only silence. When he revealed that it was Kirimo, the reaction was more than memorable. Some laughed, others gasped, but after people let the answer sink in, heads began to nod up and down solemnly. They realized, that yes, Kirimo was carrying out Satan's wishes in the land of Tharaka.

Jake continued by teaching that in the Garden of Eden, Adam chose to give his allegiance to Satan and live under his authority instead of God's. This choice enslaved him and his offspring. Therefore, since that time Satan has taught us to do things in rebellion to God in order to destroy us—God's most excellent creation—in an effort to strike back at or injure God. Kirimo has been acting as Satan's District Commissioner in Tharaka, causing rebellion towards God, and subsequently fear-filled lives among the Tharaka people.

Using this introduction as a springboard, some of the Ten Commandments (God's laws) were contrasted with what was taught in the swallowing initiation (Satan's, or Kirimo's laws). For example:

- God's law says that we should have no other gods. By sacrificing to and swearing secrecy to Kirimo, he has taken the place of God.
- God's law says that we should honor our father and mother. The young boys are taught to disobey and slander their mothers.
- God's law says that we should not lie. The boys are taught a language of lies, and the whole charade is meant to deceive and manipulate women.

By using this method of contrast, the congregation was able to see how blatantly Kirimo was causing them to stray from their Creator's intentions. With the newly-published New Testament in hand, Jake then led the congregation through several Scriptures related to idol worship and freedom in Christ.

Some of the Scriptures discussed were from Romans. Men are without excuse because “*God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen*” (1:20, NIV). According to verses 25–30, men “*exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator . . . Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts*” . . . and to depraved minds. They were *filled “with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity”* including “*envy, murder, deceit,*” and disobedience.

Continuing in Romans: God is faithful, having provided a way for us to obtain righteousness through faith. Instead of being dead in sin and living in fear of Kirimo, Tharaka people can be alive in Christ (Romans 6:11). Hence, Paul encourages believers in Romans 12 to be living sacrifices, and to no longer conform to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds.

1 John 5:19, 20a: “*We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ.*”

Galatians 5: This chapter discusses freedom in Christ as well as “life by the Spirit.” At this, Tharaka people became greatly encouraged, knowing they were no longer in bondage to Kirimo, and that there was nothing the monster could do to them if they had the Spirit of the Living God. Galatians 5:1 says, *“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”*

It was exciting to see the topic being discussed, and church leaders being willing to take a risk by getting Kirimo out in the open. The leaders told us they were pleased with the teaching, especially because people were getting into the Word and being challenged.

Throughout the remainder of our time in Tharaka, we had many opportunities to share powerful Scriptures *in their language* to Tharaka people who wondered about Kirimo and how the Word impacted their culture. We found several Scriptures giving exhortations towards living a holy life, which we thought would particularly touch Tharaka hearts when they became burdened by Kirimo: These were Colossians 2:6, Romans 6:12–14, Romans 8:12–15, and Mark 1:5.

Colossians 2:6 says, *“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”* Verse 8 continues, *“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”* This last verse reminds Tharaka believers to follow Christ and not continue in harmful practices, regardless of the traditions in Tharaka that are harmful and deceptive.

Romans 6:12–14 says, *“Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.”* Because Tharaka believers are alive in Christ, they should not offer their bodies to sin any longer, especially as instruments of wickedness. This would therefore exclude them from ever participating in a swallowing ceremony, either as an elder or child. Paul tells us to offer ourselves to God, and be used as *His* instrument.

Romans 8:12–15 reminds Tharaka believers that we have an obligation to live according to the Spirit of God, for we have received the Spirit of sonship (adoption). As verse 15 states, *“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship.”* This should encourage believers to no longer fear Kirimo because they are *in Christ*.

Also, when Jesus spoke about the kingdom of heaven being near, he was in essence reclaiming His authority on earth (Mark 1:15). Therefore, we should pledge our allegiance to his Kingdom and no longer fear other powers and principalities.

The above Scriptures can address not only harmful practices such as swallowing, but other rituals that are in contradiction to Jesus Christ. Tharaka church leaders and church goers are now equipped with the power of the Word and can find rest, as well as confidence in the Truth, setting them free from the lies of Kirimo.

Perhaps the biggest challenge Tharaka believers face is to separate themselves from things like swallowing and female circumcision, because traditions have been the center of the culture for so long. Yet, it was encouraging to see many Tharaka believers—men and women—taking a

stand against idolatry and human abuse among their own people. We knew two young men who, after being swallowed, went home and begged their father not to let their younger brothers go through the initiation. They even warned their brothers and told them it was all a farce. Also, several of our Tharaka friends who are fathers have decided not to allow their sons to go through the swallowing ceremony. Sincere Tharaka Christians are finding other ways of initiating their sons into manhood. Instead of being taught lies, boys are now being brought up to honor Jesus Christ. Even today, Tharaka church leaders are boldly teaching against the practice of swallowing as they themselves believe it goes against Scripture and perpetuates evil within the society. The impact of the mother-tongue Scriptures can not be ignored. Albert Kathenya, a church leader in Tharaka, states:

The impact is great since the truth they [wa-Tharaka] learn from the Tharaka New Testament sets them free. The truth is being revealed even to women who were the main victims of the myth of Kirimo. It is obvious that the New Testament has made a great change among the people. People are able to read for themselves the passages that speak against lies and are able to get the message straight. They do not need any interpretation of the message as they previously did when Scriptures from neighboring languages were used. They can now read in their heart language.

It was, and continues to be our prayer that more and more wa-Tharaka will turn from serving Kirimo out of fear, to worshipping Jesus Christ, who will envelope them with His love and make them His own.

End note

We are grateful to the men and women who have been willing to talk to us about such a sensitive subject as swallowing. Some experienced the initiation itself, while others have felt its effect second-hand (wives, mothers, children, and some men). A special thank you goes to Albert Kathenya who assisted with the cultural validity of this article.

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