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Controversial Art in Colonial East Africa: Murang'a Murals and the Saint James all Martyrs Anglican Memorial Cathedral

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Abstract

The *Murang'a Murals*, paintings that cover episodes in the story of Jesus Christ – *Nativity*, *Baptism*, *Last Supper*, *Agony in the Garden*, and *Crucifixion* – on the interior walls of the Saint James all Martyrs Anglican Memorial Cathedral, have become a unique 'Christian artistic statement' depicting the contestation that prevailed in Colonial East Africa between African art, religion and culture as set against that of the European. The murals were commissioned by an alliance between the Church Missionary Society and the Colonial Government as a response to African resistance to colonialism through the Mau Mau uprising. The present article focuses on the artist, Elimo Njau, the *Murang'a Murals* coded message thereof and the contestation for identity and representation that marked colonial East African. It uses the case of *Murang'a Murals* and the Mau Mau Movement to argue that the enjoining of missionaries to the colonial endeavor laid bare the contra-

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dictions, paradoxes and conflicts between the flag and the Bible as well as nationalism and faith, leading to multiple shadows of tenets that define Christianity and African religion. The murals stand as historic witnesses on the need for modern day East Africa to continuously embrace cross-cultural inclusivity even as it edges out new identities.

I dipinti murali di Murang'a, che raffigurano episodi della vita di Gesù Cristo (la Natività, il Battesimo, l'Ultima Cena, l'Agonia nell'Orto e la Crocifissione) sulle pareti interne della Cattedrale anglicana memoriale di San Giacomo martire, sono diventati una singolare "dichiarazione artistica cristiana", che rappresenta la tensione presente nell'Africa Orientale coloniale tra arte, religione e cultura africane, contrapposte a quelle europee. I dipinti furono commissionati a seguito di un'alleanza tra la Church Missionary Society e il governo coloniale, come risposta alla resistenza africana al colonialismo durante l'insurrezione dei Mau Mau. Il presente articolo si concentra sull'artista, Elimo Njau, sul messaggio in codice presente nei dipinti di Murang'a e sulla contesa per l'identità e la rappresentazione, che caratterizzò l'Africa Orientale coloniale. Il caso dei dipinti murali di Murang'a e del Movimento Mau Mau viene utilizzato per sostenere che il coinvolgimento dei missionari nell'impresa coloniale mise a nudo contraddizioni, paradossi e conflitti tra la bandiera e la Bibbia, così come tra nazionalismo e fede, generando molteplici ombre sui principi che definiscono il cristianesimo e la religione africana. I dipinti sono una testimonianza storica della necessità, per l'Africa Orientale contemporanea, di abbracciare continuamente l'inclusività interculturale nel processo di definizione di nuove identità.

1. *Introduction*

On 1st January 1844, missionary Dr. Ludwig Kraft arrived at the coastal town of Mombasa under the commissioning of the London based Church Missionary Society (CMS). His visit marked the beginning, at least for East Africa, of a third wave of African Christianization effort, and by far the most successful, following the 1st and 16th centuries Christianization efforts by Jewish and Portuguese visitors respectively. On 26th February 1885, 14 European powers completed the 'scramble for Africa' campaign by signing the General Act of the Berlin Conference. Consequently, between 1895 and 1964 East Africa was entirely under the control of the British, save an early German control of Tanganyika which came to an abrupt end in 1945 following German defeat in the Second World War. In 1950, Ghana became the first African state to acquire independence, triggering a more robust pan Africanist resistance to colonialism across the continent. The Mau Mau guerrilla military group was popular and fierce in East Africa[1]. Its uprising between 1952 and 1960 led to widespread massacre of African civilians and European settlers, missionaries,

[1] MAU MAU was first a slogan which was later adopted as the name of a guerrilla fighting movement. Its full meaning was Kiswahili language abbreviated, *Mzungu Arudi Ulaya, Mwafrica Apate Uhuru* (Europeans Return Europe, Africans Reclaim Freedom).

and police. The response of the British was not only hard-line, through arrests and fatal torture but also a soft-line religio-cultural imaging and propaganda. The missionary, particularly the CMS establishment, which enjoyed trust and support by the colonizing power, became a necessary tool in this endeavor. The *Murang'a Murals* were dedicated to martyrs of the Massacre. They in turn became a unique 'Christian artistic statement' depicting the contestation that prevailed between African art, religion and culture as set against that of the European (Fig. 1).

Therefore, the story of church establishment in East Africa during the third wave, particularly Anglicanism among the Kikuyu people of Kenya, is not complete without an account of Elimo Njau's *Murang'a Murals* on the interior walls of Saint James all Martyrs Anglican Memorial Cathedral in Murang'a Town (Fig. 2). And yet, with the exception of Jesse Mugambi's book chapter, *The Artist in the Religious Context*[2], most writings on Njau's artworks, galleries and exhibitions on both local and international scenes come far short of locating his unique role as an African Christian artist with a very controversial assignment – doing art in an extremely polarized society and violent neighborhood. To present "the unpopular white man's religion" to the African at the watch of the Mau Mau querela fighters was a risky affair. It is noteworthy that even Johanna Agthe's *Religion in Contemporary East African Art*[3], which surveyed religious motivation and theme for various East African artists misses out on both the *Murang'a Murals* as well as the artist, Elimo Njau. Apparently, Njau's highly celebrated teacher-talent in painting as well as his creative, independent and indomitable spirit in birthing East Africa's visual art have often over shadowed the faith he firmly stood for and the Christian Pan-Africanist message he so passionately communicated. Notably, however, Njau's artworks have been given considerable attention in the academy of art as foundational to the Makerere, Dar es Salaam, and much later, to the Kenyatta schools. Such academic works include books by Mario Pissarra (*Re/writing Sam J Ntiro Challenges of Framing in the Excavation of a 'Lost' Pioneer*)[4] and Terry Hirst (*New Art from Kenyatta College*)[5]. Njau is recognized as a student of Sam Ntiro, who in turn was trained by Margaret Trowel, the founder of Makerere Art College[6].

In Elimo's own testimony[7], «it is the five paintings on the interior north wall of Saint James All Martyrs Memorial Cathedral in Kiharu», Murang'a,

[2] Mugambi 2014, p. 37.
[3] Agthe 1994, p. 376.
[4] Pissarra 2015, p. 59.
[5] Hirst 1971, p. 39.
[6] Agthe 1994, p. 376.
[7] Joshua, Interview, 2 June 2023.

that provided a turning point in his visual art career[8]. They became his most celebrated work. Murang'a town is located about 60 miles from Nairobi city[9]. Popularly known as *Murang'a Murals*, the 1959-year paintings that apply African iconography in illustrating elements of the Christ story consist of *Nativity*, *Baptism*, *Last Supper*, *Agony in the Garden*, and *Crucifixion* (Fig. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)[10]. These were a product of an alliance between the academy of art, the missionaries and the colonial power. In 1952, the British Colonial Government declared a State of Emergency following the killing of settlers and senior chiefs in certain parts of the country. The Mau Mau freedom fighter's outlawed uprising (1952-1960) led to death of over 20,000 people[11], including African civilians, European settlers, British soldiers and police. Many more were unaccounted for as they had disappeared. The British arrested well over 150, 000 people who were galled for indefinite periods without trial and in indefinite sentences. The idea to build a church in Murang'a, the center of Mau Mau uprising, as a permanent memorial was born by the Anglican Bishop of Mombasa, the Right Rev. L.J. Beecher, and the District Commissioner of Fort Hill, John Pinney. On 18th May 1955, while en route from consecrating the first African bishops at Namirembe Cathedral in Kampala, Uganda, and in the presence of over 4,000 Kikuyu congregants, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend Dr. Geoffrey Fisher, laid the foundation stone with the words, «In memory of those who died in the Mau Mau uprising as martyrs to their faith in Jesus Christ and all those who gave their lives to fight against Mau Mau»[12]. At that time, Bishop Beecher was a frequent visitor to Uganda, particularly to Bishop Tucker Theological College in Mukono, and to Makerere College. During one of these visits, Trowell, who headed the Fine Arts Department, introduced Njau as an outstanding Christian artist. As a result, the *Murang'a Murals* were commissioned by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in London and supervised by Architect Julian Hill on behalf of the colonial master. Young Njau, who had just completed his three-years Diploma in Fine Arts and a one-year diploma in Teaching, was hosted by newly appointed Bishop Obadiah Kariuki in Murang'a. The Mau Mau Uprising was a bloody affair and hence the Murals were realized in the middle of a long political conflict. Diane Stinton rightly observes that as a guest of Bishop Kariuki, Njau «spent several months learning the local landscape, absorbing the contours of nature, culture, and politics. In the process, he interacted with British settlers

[8] Njau 1963, p. 15.

[9] The local Kikuyu community called the village 'Kiharu' and the larger region 'Murang'a'. The British administrator renamed it Fort Hall. The independent Kenyan government recognized it as Murang'a District.

[10] Miller, Foster 2014, pp. 21-22.

[11] Pissarra 2015, p. 59.

[12] Department of Information 1955.

and soldiers (who took him as the church sweeper), with Mau Mau oath-takers and loyalist oath-haters, and with East African Revival 'brethren' who 'X-rayed' him on his experience of salvation. In 1959, he returned to undertake the actual painting of the chapel wall. Within a single month, and with the bishop praying for him daily, he completed his mission, leaving – unsigned – five stunning, murals depicting key moments in the life of Christ»[13].

Apart from the murals, which «were highly popularized among religious communities in the West during the early 1960s»[14], Njau is associated with many more outstanding art works and institutions. They include, the 'Let the children paint' workshops at the Makerere (Uganda), Sorsbie, ChemChemi, and Paa ya Paa art galleries in Nairobi, Kenya, the Kibo Art Center in Marangu, Tanzania; the *Harambee*, *Christ in the Art of Africa* and *The Holy Family in the Art of Africa and Asia* documentary films, as well as many awards.

The present article focuses on the artist, Elimo Njau, the *Murang'a Murals* coded message thereof and the contestation for identity and representation that marked colonial East African. It uses the case of Murang'a Murals and the Mau Mau Movement to argue that the enjoining of missionaries to the colonial endeavor laid bare the contradictions, paradoxes and conflicts between the flag and the Bible as well as nationalism and faith, leading to multiple shadows of tenets that define Christianity and African religion[15]. The murals stand as historic witnesses on the need for modern day East Africa to continuously embrace cross-cultural inclusivity even as it edges out new identities.

2. *The Mau Mau uprising in the context of Colonizing, Christianizing and Civilizing the African*

British presence in colonial East Africa has rightly been categorized into three main groups, the administrator, the settler and the missionary. Their interests, almost identifiable to the three groups, have also been popularized as the three main objectives, to Colonize, to Civilize and to Christianize[16]. The main reason as to why the Mau Mau movement was started had to do with appropriation of fertile lands, forced labour and hut taxes. The settler was given "the white highlands" to cultivate and Africans were forced to work for the settler in order to pay taxes. The Kikuyu community, living in the central and most fertile lands with weather closely identifiable to that of England, were most affected. The illegal movement, which the British called terrorist,

[13] Miller 2014, p. 3-4.
[14] Gachihi 2014, p. 4.
[15] Gachihi 2014, p. IV.
[16] Gachihi 2014, pp. 2-3.

remained largely a Kikuyu affair gaining a nationwide support and network. It used oathing to separate and target white "collaborators" and sought support of "nationalists".

To the British administrator, Kikuyu people were simply «failing to adjust to new reality changes of modernity»[17]. Phillip Mitchell, the governor in charge in 1952 described his duty as that of «guiding the African along the road to a higher civilization, while preserving the organic identity of society»[18]. They saw it as their justified duty to civilize the African by introducing their religion, way of life and administrative order while rubbishing that of the colonized. The settler was even more oblivious to the rights of the Kikuyu. The African, who worked in their fields and homesteads, did not count in their pursuit for production. The settlers were most vulnerable to guerrilla attacks on account of their remote and sparse settlement. They organized various demonstrations in Nairobi demanding better protection by administration against the Mau Mau menace. The missionaries enjoined the colonial team and used demeaning words such as "retrogressive" "debased" and "black magic" to affirm stereotype images of the ingrate African who was unwilling or unable to appreciate virtues of benevolent colonialism[19]. They described the movement as an «irrational and atavistic bestial cult, whose aim was to wipe out Christianity and modern civilization in Kikuyuland, and kill those opposed to it»[20]. Farther Perlo of Consolata Mission in Nyeri described «the state of things as essentially deplorable, barbarous and inhuman»[21].

On the contrary, the Mau Mau movement sought to reverse all the three colonizer's objectives by demanding national independence of the black African. To a large extent, the African envisioned an African society without the Whiteman's interruption. As a result, the Mau Mau, and by extension, the Kikuyu people, were opposed to Western education, medicine, and religion. This conflict manifested earlier, in 1929, when Missionary John Athur of the Presbyterian Church attempted to force the Kikuyu to stop Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)[22]. Jomo Kenyatta, who was a secret elitist leader of the Mau Mau and would become the first Kenyan president, and Harry Thuku, a popular freedom fighter, rallied the Kikuyu against the missionary and opened African Independent Churches and Schools. Kenyatta argued that the missionary does not understand that FGM is an integral process of making a Kikuyu woman[23].

Therefore, the Mau Mau viewed every Kikuyu Christian, including the Af-

[17] Gachihi 2014, p. 4.
[18] Berman 1992, p. 229.
[19] Gachihi 2014, p. 4.
[20] Carey 1953, p. 23.
[21] Cagnolo 1933, p. 257.
[22] Joshua 2009, p. 17.
[23] Kenyatta 2015, p. 24.

rican pastor, as a compromiser and part of the colonizer. Its fighters killed and maimed many Africans, especially Christian leaders and chiefs. Many churches were burned down at the height of the State of Emergency[24]. This violence was reactionary. Recent literatures have indicated that the British were crueler, killing and incarcerating thousands of innocent lives[25]. The Mau Mau has been celebrated in independent Kenya for its heroic efforts in agitating for freedom. In June 2013, Mau Mau victims won a case in the Hague International Court for 20 thousand pounds compensation and an apology from the United Kingdom (UK) government. However, the government later discontinued the payment plan claiming that it was not responsible for atrocities conducted by the colonial regime[26].

3. *Elimo Njau's – the African Christian Artist*

Rekyaelimo Philipo Njau was born on 24th August 1932 in Marangu village at the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania. His parents were first-generation African Christians of the Lutheran mission established in what was then German East Africa in 1887[27]. As fate would have it, Njau would take after the career of his father, who was a Christian teacher in a mission school. During an interview with Tom Odhiambo at his Paa ya Paa gallery in Nairobi, the artist recounted,

> I'm originally from Tanzania. My father was educated by the Germans and became a teacher of Kiswahili, German and agriculture. They gave him a scholarship to Germany but there was a mix up so that his name was there but with a different picture. He was grateful he didn't go because the person who was taken in his place was so black and the Germans scrubbed him so much thinking the black skin was dirt. So my father didn't go to Germany, but was very well known. When they started a training college in Marangu, Kilimanjaro, they appointed him a teacher. He taught the first pastors in the Lutheran Church, then later Bishop Stephen Moshi, who later became my godfather. It was the beginning of the Church in East Africa, especially the Lutheran Church[28].

It is this childhood Christian faith that later would form his philosophy of art and of life. His father called him Rekyaelimoo, which means 'one who dedicates his soul to God' in Chaga language. The name is reminiscent of a father's prayer. As he explained:

[24] Gathogo 2024, p.16.
[25] Elkins 2005, p. 49.
[26] Hasian, Muller 2016, pp. 164-180.
[27] Wright 1971, p. 46.
[28] Odhiambo 2014.

I asked myself how I would paint the murals but eventually I believed I would be able to do it because as a child, I was born and kept alive by my father's faith. I was supposed to die as a baby. The missionaries who were looking after me in the hospital told my father to take me home to die peacefully because I was very sick. My father took me home and prayed the whole night and the following morning he found me laughing and joking. I had recovered. And so he named me 'Rekyaelimoo' (and) told me that I wouldn't have been alive if it were not for God[29].

The difficulty western missionaries had in pronouncing the name led to a corrupted, shorter version: Elimo. Nevertheless, Njau enjoyed learning in a primary school that was within a German teacher college where his father worked. The father was also a good artist. He wrote songs for the church that still are sung today. He also wrote poetry and carved wooden spoons. According to Njau, his father's Christian faith, along with nature in form of trees, provided moments for spiritual reflection and art inspiration – virtues he has kept all along. He recounted as follows:

He would take me to church on Sundays and sit us under a tree to listen to the pastor preach. I liked climbing the trees. Sometimes I would look at the tall trees and feel like they made me connect with God, which made a huge impact on me because I saw the place as an open-air cathedral. That's why you see plenty of trees in this compound. In Jesus' day, he preached in the open and towards his crucifixion, he went to Gethsemane. This place – the Paa ya Paa compound – can be a quiet place for retreat and meditation to offer silence for artists to reflect and dream their works[30].

Later Elimo joined the Moshi School, where he met a very influential British headmaster and «teachers [who] were very committed and good people … were like elder brothers, parents … their commitment ensured we didn't lose touch with the Christian faith during secondary school»[31]. Visual art was always with him as a Sunday School teacher during holidays at home as well as in school. He used to demonstrate Bible stories to children using local imageries, a project he professionally undertook as an examinable work much later at Makerere's Fine Art Department in form of the *Murang'a Murals*. «My father inspired me into art by buying me a box of colours when I drew his portrait», explained Njau[32]. Although drawing was not taught in schools, he practiced it by illustrating biblical themes. While he was in junior secondary school, the East African Literature Bureau (EALB) had a competition to design a cover for a book, *Miti ni Mali*[33]. After winning the EALB competition, the head teacher was so impressed that he bought him a book on history of Art published by Cambridge University.

[29] Odhiambo 2014.
[30] Odhiambo 2014.
[31] Odhiambo 2014.
[32] Joshua 2023.
[33] *Miti ni Mali* is Swahili phrase meaning trees are wealth or valuable property.

Njau studied in Tabora School at secondary level. Since he came from a family of 10 children, he had examples to emulate in terms of a career path. First, he enrolled in a Primary 1 teacher college, with intent of following his father's career. However, through his head teacher, he secured a chance to take a special entry exam for Makerere College and in 1953 joined his elder brother in the Ugandan institution – the dream of many elite minds at that time in East Africa. In 1957, he was awarded a Diploma in Fine Arts, and in 1958, a Diploma in Education. Two years later, he graduated with a degree in Fine Arts and History of Art and went on to teach at an elementary school in Makerere between 1959 and 1962. In 1964, he founded the Kibos Art Centre near his home in Marangu, Moshi district, Tanzania, on a land donated by his father. It is in this Art Centre where he wrote and exhibited a popular poem that depicts his African identity and praise of African heritage. He wrote:

It is like a mango tree.
Too slow in growth to compete with ephemeral fashions of the art world; but with roots too deep in the soil to be uprooted by any shallow wind of "civilization".
Its roots sink deep into the earth to reach out for the bones of our ancestry and sap that is our heritage from God.
Its trunk powerful and round like true communal life in unity and harmony.
Its branches open up into generosity of leaves, flowers and colourful fruits to feed the world and inspire humanity with spiritual health, joy, love, peace and humility in eternal wonder[34].

Njau went on to become one of the most celebrated artists in East Africa. After a brief visit to Kenya to do the Murals, he continued to teach in Makerere until 1962[35]. His 'let the children paint' workshops and exhibitions with students in Kampala using local materials such as charcoal, clay, ash, leaves and tree bark, gained fame and was shown in London. The head of the Sorsbie Gallery[36], Alex Mitchell, paid for the exhibition to come to Nairobi. The world had discovered Njau, as he recounted: «People were following me, telling me to attend conferences in Congo, Ghana, and other places. They sent me a ticket to go to Accra, and I accepted the invitation and went. The exhibition that went to Germany was named 'Do Not Copy'»[37]. At only 24 years of age, Njau was invited by Mitchell to work as his deputy in the Sorsbie Gallery. As a pleasant surprise, he was given a house in Westlands and an entertainment allowance.

Njau married Rebeka Nyanjega, a Kenyan collegemate and a poet, who after her secondary school studies at Alliance Girls and degree in education at

[34] Khatili 2025, n.d.
[35] Njau 2014, p. 65-68.
[36] Sir. Malin Sorsbie was the founding director of Sorsbie Gallery in Nairobi.
[37] Odhiambo 2014.

Makerere University returned to Kenya to teach in Alliance before co-founding the Nairobi Girls School in 1964. They had two children together but parted ways in 1983. To her credit, she helped Njau break away from the colonial art enclave with the founding of an informal centre in Westlands called the Njau Art Studio just before she became too busy with editing *The Target*, the magazine of the National Council of Churches in Kenya. The studio became a true "salon" — a meeting place for artists such as sculptors, musicians, poets and writers. Njau was given a weekly column in the Nation newspaper. In the spirit of a now-independent Kenya, he broke from colonialism, encouraging African art to be seen as truly African. His writings made him unpopular with his landlord and eventually he was asked to relocate. The studio moved to downtown premises, under the name Paa ya Paa Arts Centre. The Swahili name translates as "the antelope rises", bringing to life the Akamba art of woodcarving, in which the antelope had come to be synonymous with the Kenyan art popular with tourists.

During the mid-1970s, Njau and his family left for teaching assignment at the university of Dar es Salaam. Interestingly, Njau did not stay in Dar Es Salaam for more than two years. While away, Njau was concerned that his house help girl back in Nairobi would not manage their gallery shop well and therefore he requested American Presbyterian Church to send someone to assist. They send Phillda, a Black American lady photographer, singer and writer. As fate would have it, she become his second wife much later in the mid-1980s following the divorce of 1983. Njau summarized it as follows:

> She worked in the church where I worked, for long. She worked as a church photographer in Latin America. Then she was sent to East Africa to do photographs. Phillda was sent to do a story and she finished and went back. When I moved to Dar es Salaam – to teach at the University – I had to leave Paa ya Paa under my house girl; I didn't want to close it down. I wrote to the Lutheran Church in America to send us someone to help run the gallery. They sent Phillda, plus a salary. When we came back to Nairobi, we requested for accommodation at her place, as her guests. Her term ended in two years and she went back to the USA. The rest is history[38].

Therefore, Phillda had been with him since the early 1970s, first as a professional photographer and volunteer from the Presbyterian Church who was keen to do research on Njau's Christian art. Subsequently, «she became his wife and now serves as the Paa ya Paa gallery's archivist, curator and tour guide, taking visitors all around their three-acre compound»[39]. According to Njau, the circumstances that led to his divorce with Rebeka were simply "irreconcilable differences". As Lenox Khatili rightly put it, «the success of Eli-

[38] Odhiambo 2014.
[39] Gacheru 2013.

mo's strive for representation of African artistic production and intellectual discourse have been bootrapped in part by both Rebeca and Phillda»[40].

In 1975, Njau moved his gallery to a five-acre plot of land on Ridgeways Road, near Kiambu Road. That home had previously belonged to the Oxford University Press but was graciously bought for Kenyan artists by Njau's secondary school teacher out of appreciation for what his former student was doing for the arts in Africa[41].

In the evening of 8 November 1997, a fire, believed to have started when a power line fell, engulfed the Njaus' century-old farm house and adjacent gallery; leaving them with few personal effects. In one mighty blow, 32 years of Kenya's history in the form of sculptures, artefacts, paintings and over 7,000 books worth millions of shillings were destroyed by the inferno[42]. Without insurance and characteristic of its name, Paa ya Paa gallery burned down only to rise from the ashes. Friends of Njau contributed to a fund which assisted in rebuilding. During a 90th-birthday celebration at his rebuilt gallery home, Njau jokingly told his friends that he is the richest person in Ridgeways as he had never lacked something to eat[43].

Njau has since taken a retirement quiet life in his home in Ridgeways, Nairobi, occasionally hosting special art events. When I visited him during my research interviews in June 2023, he was charming and welcoming alongside his wife Phillda.

4. *The* Murang'a Murals

Margaretta rightly observed that Njau «could have remained at Makerere to teach and create sculptures, which were his greatest joys»[44]. He could have as well developed a great academic career in Fine Art alongside his Tanzanian mentor, Sam Joseph Ntiro (April 20, 1923 – January 1, 1993) and Kenyans such as Gregory Maloba and Rosemary Karuga. Ntiro was a painter and Fine Arts lecturer, and later a diplomat and civil servant who was the first East African High Commissioner to the Court of Saint James in London from the then Republic of Tanganyika. He served from 1961 until 1964[45]. Not only was he the first East African visual artist to publish a thesis, *Desturi za Wachagga* (Traditions of the Chagga) in 1953, but also the first to receive a debut solo *Ex-*

[40] Khatili 2025.
[41] Gacheru 2022.
[42] Kanyeki 2012.
[43] Gacheru 2013.
[44] Gacheru 2013.
[45] Mann 2010.

hibition Paintings of Africa at Piccadilly Gallery in 1955, where he sold over 30 works[46]. Like Njau, Ntiro was a Lutheran who hailed from the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro and was trained by Trowell. Similarly, Maloba was a senior lecturer and sculptor famed for the *Independence Monument* erected on Speke Road and the huge concrete *Independence Arch* that frames entrance to the Ugandan parliament building in Kampala[47]. On the contrary, Njau left the academy and became more involved with creating Christian art, first alongside Maloba at Saint Francis Chapel of Makerere and then at the Anglican Church in Murang'a, Kenya[48].

Saint Francis Preaching to Animals painting at the baptismal fountain in the Makerere chapel is one of Njau's earliest works. As the then chaplain Rev. Canon Benoni Mugavura-Mutana explained, «it honours legendary tales about Saint Francis as a holy and gentle man with deep love for nature»[49]. Certainly, Njau was reading from the script of Italian Renaissance painters and the theme of nature and animals was always dear to him. In contrast, he used bright colours «to express the vibrancy of the African landscape»[50]. *The Head of Christ* is painted on a board that hangs on Hampton University Museum as a gift of the Harmon Foundation. In this painting, Njau depicts a Black Christ in a red top with fire-coloured hair and goatee. Behind Christ is swirling darkness. At certain points the red colour, which seems to be coming from Christ himself, is layered on top of the dark background. The red colouring signifies Jesus' blood, which is a protective barrier from the consuming sin represented in darkness. Although Christ is surrounded by the darkness, he stands unaffected, his eyes closed in prayer. However, a different reading of the image is likely, as pointed out by Tashae Smith, who wrote: «Njau did mix Christian iconography with commentary on the oppressive colonial system as seen through the mural *The Nativity*. *The Head of Christ* could be painting a similar message of Kenyan resilience in the face of the oppressive darkness of Colonization»[51].

Clearly, *The Murang'a Murals* is Njau's best-known work. Following a review featured in the *London Times*[52], the murals established Njau as an artist of international renown, albeit still within a colonial framework. His depictions of Bible scenes in a traditional African manner gained popularity as symbols of post-colonial African-Chrisitan identity and remain a source of pride[53]. The *Nativity* shows a thatched home in a Kikuyu village that is opened

[46] Riviera 2023.
[47] Mutana 2017.
[48] Mutana 2017.
[49] Mutana 2017.
[50] Mutana 2017.
[51] Smith 2022.
[52] The London Times 1958.
[53] Manyibe 2019.

to reveal a Black Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. The other people in the painting are also black. Most of the mural depicts the beautiful Kikuyu landscape, which includes a British detention camp of the type used during the Mau Mau uprising to detain those associated with the Kenya Land and Freedom Army. Smith rightly observes that «Njau's mural expresses his love of Christianity but also his anticolonial sentiments toward the British Colonial system for its treatment of those opposed to colonization»[54]. Njau knew the dangers of expressing anticolonial ideas given that he did not sign his name on the murals until 2006 for fear that they would have been sabotaged by the colonial government (Fig. 8). Although the same government commissioned the Murals, it only envisioned a commemorative message for the victims and not a promotion of Africanism and Black ideals. Njau also feared that his socialist background may be suspect to the capitalist regime then in charge of the entire East Africa following takeover of Tanzania from Germany.

Today, *Murang'a Murals* are well enjoined with the local society. Whereas Elimo Njau has been largely critiqued as a collaborator with the colonizer, the Murals are well treasured by the Anglican community in Kiharu and beyond[55]. In September 2016, a local artist called Godfrey Githu Kafue added five more murals on the right interior wall. These continued the story of Jesus by depicting *Resurrection*, *Doubting Thomas*, *Road to Emmaus*, *Ascension*, and the *Last Judgement* (Fig. 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14).

5. *The Message of* Murang'a Murals

Njau has always been aware of his culture and surroundings and he has always expressed it unapologetically. Indeed, he is very proud of his East African identity and background, which he cites often. «To me, art is a direct enrichment to human life and, as such, art must communicate… as artists we must never escape the call to live more fully and truly in our local surroundings» said Njau during a recent interview[56]. When he was invited to give a talk in Accra after painting the Murals, Njau said, «I must confess again I am chained to the present. I am a child born of the present cultural conflicts and frustrations, the present challenges and hopes»[57]. He attempted to find meaning and hope through art and expressed his support in a very pragmatic way. He always felt that the visitor – the colonizer – had interrupted the smooth life of the African and attempted a new influence. Noting that this influence was greater in East

[54] Smith 2022.
[55] Business Daily, 2020.
[56] Odhiambo 2014.
[57] Njau 1967, p. 64.

Africa than it is in West Africa as depicted by the type of art, he maintained that the African artist must not copy the Westerner, or simply make without an underlying message. He wrote:

> I do not believe in art for art's sake when it means the pursuit of "isms" and movements. I believe in art with meaning and purpose. To me art is a direct enrichment to human life and as such art must communicate. Our art is dead if it doesn't communicate. As artists, we must never escape the call to live more fully and truly in our local surroundings. True art grows from the soil and the full community that we live in[58].

While Njau embraced Christianity, the artistic expressions of the Westerner and the Medieval paintings of Europe popularized by the Department of Fine Art at Makerere did not inspire or speak to him. Similarly, abstract paintings of African mysticism appeared to him vague and confusing. However, the symbolism in the African way of life – nature in the form of animals, trees and landscape in their simplicity – was helpful. He vividly remembers his intentional search for a guiding philosophy:

> When I finished my studies at Makerere College five years ago, I was puzzled by the present artistic chaos in East Africa and the world at large. I said to myself: "Here I am with all my qualifications both as an artist and teacher, but I don't know where I am. How can I teach my pupils if I don't know where I am going? I must look for some concrete philosophy to guide me, both as an artist and as a teacher". I looked for this philosophy in modern Western art, in vain; I looked for it in the past African art and I only found part of it. I found a sense of purpose and a powerful symbolism related to the African way of life. I looked for it in the Contemporary Asian artists in East Africa; I found the artists just as confused as myself[59].

Part of the confusion for Njau was in the denominational differences in the consumption of art within Christian circles. Catholicism uses images as a symbolic tool in worship and, hence, the Makerere chapel is awash with murals and sculptures. The Protestant faith, including both the Church of England that commissioned the Murang'a Murals and the Lutheran tradition of his Tanzanian upbringing, reject images in worship for fear of substituting them for the image of Christ. Therefore, in Njau's experience, Roman Christianity would sharply differ doctrinally with both English and German counterparts. Similarly, a contradiction prevailed in perceptions of Africanism where the Western missionary critiqued African religious expressions as animist and unfounded. Yet Njau would strongly identify with his cultural values and symbols as a pointer to God and humanity. It is in these African religious expressions that he discovered God's creative secret. He said:

[58] Njau 1967, p. 63.
[59] Njau 1967, p. 56.

At last, one day, I saw that the pumpkins in my mother's garden were never exactly alike. At the same time, I remembered twins who were at school with me; I realised they were not exactly alike. I looked at my sister, she was not like my mother. I examined myself in a mirror; I found that I was not identical to my father or grandfather. I looked at the young babies being born. I found that every baby was a new creation. Then, why should I copy anybody? I discovered God's creative secret. God is omnipotent as well as omnipresent. Then he must be in me and his power must be in me because he did not create me in the image of anybody else but Himself. In all my creative efforts therefore, I must keep Him alive. I believed that as time went on, He would be so much part of me that I would be able to fill up Africa with vigorous and fertile young artists who would prove to the world, God's full presence in Africa[60].

Njau was passionate about developing African art and religious expression through art education in an African way, something that he found highly lacking especially in the East Africa Art school. He considered himself to be part of true Africanists, whom he described as those «embracing the ideology of the living God and His creative power through the mind, souls, and bodies of real people in present Africa»[61]. The concept of liberating Africa was well alive in his mind when he addressed the first International Congress of Africanists in Ghana between 11 and 18 November 1962. He challenged them that «in digging and proving our past … we mustn't forget to live our own present life and make our own unique contribution to the modern world»[62]. Hence Njau was not only ready as an artist to fight for African freedom but more so, he was part of a pan-Africanist movement that mobilized Africans towards this noble course.

What Njau advocated for is what African theologians later developed into Contextual, Black and Reconstruction theologies. As an artist, Njau was way ahead of his African Christian contemporaries in making a unique contribution. By presenting the 'Christ story in an African cup' and demystifying African culture for the Colonial West, he created cultural bridges between colonial powers and African societies at a time of agitation for independence.

Njau was highly critical of colonialism and the colonizer's influence on society as unnecessary disruption. As he would in later years admit, he «has a soft spot for art that tells the history of Kenya's liberation struggle and the Bible in a traditional African landscape»[63]. Through his paintings, he expressed his love of Christianity but also his anticolonial sentiments toward the British colonial system for its treatment of those opposed to colonization. Njau was well aware of the «dangers of expressing anticolonial ideas seeing how he did not sign his name on the murals until 2006 for fear that they would have been

[60] Njau 1967, p. 57.
[61] Njau 1967, p. 57.
[62] Njau 1967, p. 60.
[63] Joshua 2023.

sabotaged by the colonial government»[64]. In addition, he knew that his life would be in danger if he expressed openly his anticolonial sentiments. Instead, he used artworks to tell the story of Kenya's liberation struggle and the Bible in the traditional African manner. The murals show a thatched home in a Kikuyu village that is cut in half to reveal a black Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. The other people in the painting are also black. Whereas the scene is on Jesus' birth in the context of a beautiful Kikuyu landscape, the top left includes a British detention camp. «The detention camp is a reference to the camps used during the Mau Mau uprising to detain those associated with the Kenya Land and Freedom Army»[65].

Njau's philosophy was also a form of African resistance to western cultural imperialism. In Makerere, he was unhappy with new pedagogical approach to art training that was adopted after Margaret Trowell's retirement in 1957. These changes were introduced when Sam Ntiru took over in 1958 and further implemented at Cecil Todd headship of the school from 1959. Whereas Trowell had emphasized a creative art that epitomized an African cultural authenticity, her successors were in favour of European models which focused more on colour theory and Western art history. This approach sidelined African's own right to construct their histories and identities through art. Cecil Todd was himself a graduate of Royal College of Art in London who had left a teaching job in South Africa to come to Uganda's Makere's Art School. Njau described Todd as «one of the few teachers who initiated the idea that Africa is a blank slate on which to create something»[66]. He said, «so I differed from him when he wrote off that whole tradition, that nothing existed before. Todd was blanketing our history, which was not his duty»[67]. This critique of Western style might be the reason as to why he was never invited for a teaching position at Makerere. The same ideology created conflict between him and his European landlord much later in Nairobi. When he was appointed as a contributor to the Nation Newspaper in the immediate post-independence Kenya, he wrote on 31 July 1988 as follows:

> Many of us move lock, stock and barrel to the Western style. We uproot ourselves and our creativity becomes just a few spices on the white man's plate. But art should be a way of life, enriching us, nourishing us in body and spirit, and growing from the African soil of which we are a part[68].

As he wrote this, Njau Art Studio was on a rental space which had become a burgeoning spot for painters, sculptors, musicians, poets and writer with

[64] Mellon 2025, pp. 1913-1967.
[65] Mellon 2025, p. 1913.
[66] Njau 1967, p. 57.
[67] Njau 1967, p. 57.
[68] Njau 1988.

spirit of fidelity to an African consciousness and identity. These became quite unsettling for the European landlord and as a result he was asked to vacate the rented apartment.

Similarly, Njau's painting of the *Head of Christ* depicts «a black Christ in a red top coloured hair behind a swirling darkness»[69]. Apparently, the red colouring is blood providing a protective barrier from the consuming darkness in deep prayers depicted by the closed eyes. This mix of Christian iconography with commentary on the oppressive colonial system as seen through the mural, *The Nativity. Head of Christ* was certainly painting a similar message of Kenyan resilience in the face of the oppressive darkness of colonization.

6. *Conclusion*

The article relied on oral, literary and archival sources to reflect on Njau's artistic contribution, the *Murang'a Murals*. It established that the murals are in themselves controversial heritage that represents a time of major conflict in the history of East Africa. They stand at the confluence of cultures, religions and civilizations. Further, the article celebrated Njau as a distinguished beacon of East African art. More importantly, his voice as a panafricanist and an afroChristian artist in colonial times is in many ways exemplary and a source of inspiration for the region. His masterpiece, the *Murang'a Murals*, depict a contradiction in the entire missionary project in East Africa. That the British missionaries enjoined with their administration in the colonizing affair was a major undoing for Christianization just like the enslaving appetite of the Portuguese was for Catholic evangelization on the Eastern Africa coast during the 16th century. When a religion that teaches equality of all humans is represented by those who enslave, colonize and demean others it becomes suspect to its intended converts. *The Murang'a Murals* represents a process that the theologian would term as indigenization, an effort to replace European cultural values and forms with African indigenous forms and expressions.

Beyond Christianity, the *Murang'a Murals* are highly symbolic of a society determined to cross cultural boundaries. They are a challenge to modern society to embrace inclusivism as opposed to retrogressive ethnocentric tendencies. Whereas East Africa is in many ways different today in that all East African states, including Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, became independent between 1963 and 1964, it is noteworthy that the issues raised in the *Murang'a Murals* still reverberate over 70 years on. Colonial policies and attitudes are quite a

[69] Mellon 2025, pp. 1913-1967.

nightmare. Njau's painted the murals within a unique fusion of religious indifference, cultural intolerance and political conflict in the region. His painting creatively used art symbolism Africa to propose a dialogue between African Indigenous Religion and Christianity[70]. In addition, he called migrant religions such as Christianity and Islam to embrace Africaninity. He shall be celebrated in Africa, alongside Steve Biko of South Africa, as an early proponent of 'back consciousness' and Pan-Africanism[71]. Africa must be bold to redress the gains of colonialism by crossing boundaries in embracing modernity while at the same time promoting its own identity, values, cultural heritage and religion. East Africans must love their civilization, be proud of being associated with black, Kiswahili language and local foods. Ancestors are not devils and the African culture is not inferior in any way.

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[70] Fouéré, Marie-Emmanuelle, Thibon 2020.

[71] Lonardi 2020.

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Appendix

Fig. 1. Map of Murang'a, Kenya and Africa (Source: <https://mapcarta.com/12716836>, 10.10.2023)

Fig. 2. Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs in Murang'a (picture by author 10.10.2023)

Fig. 3. Elimo Njau, *Nativity*, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 10.10.2023)

Fig. 4. Elimo Njau, *Baptism*, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 10.10.2023)

Fig. 5. Elimo Njau, *The Last Supper*, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 10.10.2023)

Fig. 6. Elimo Njau, *Agony in the Garden*, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 10.10.2023)

Fig. 7. Elimo Njau, *Crucifixion*, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 10.10.2023)

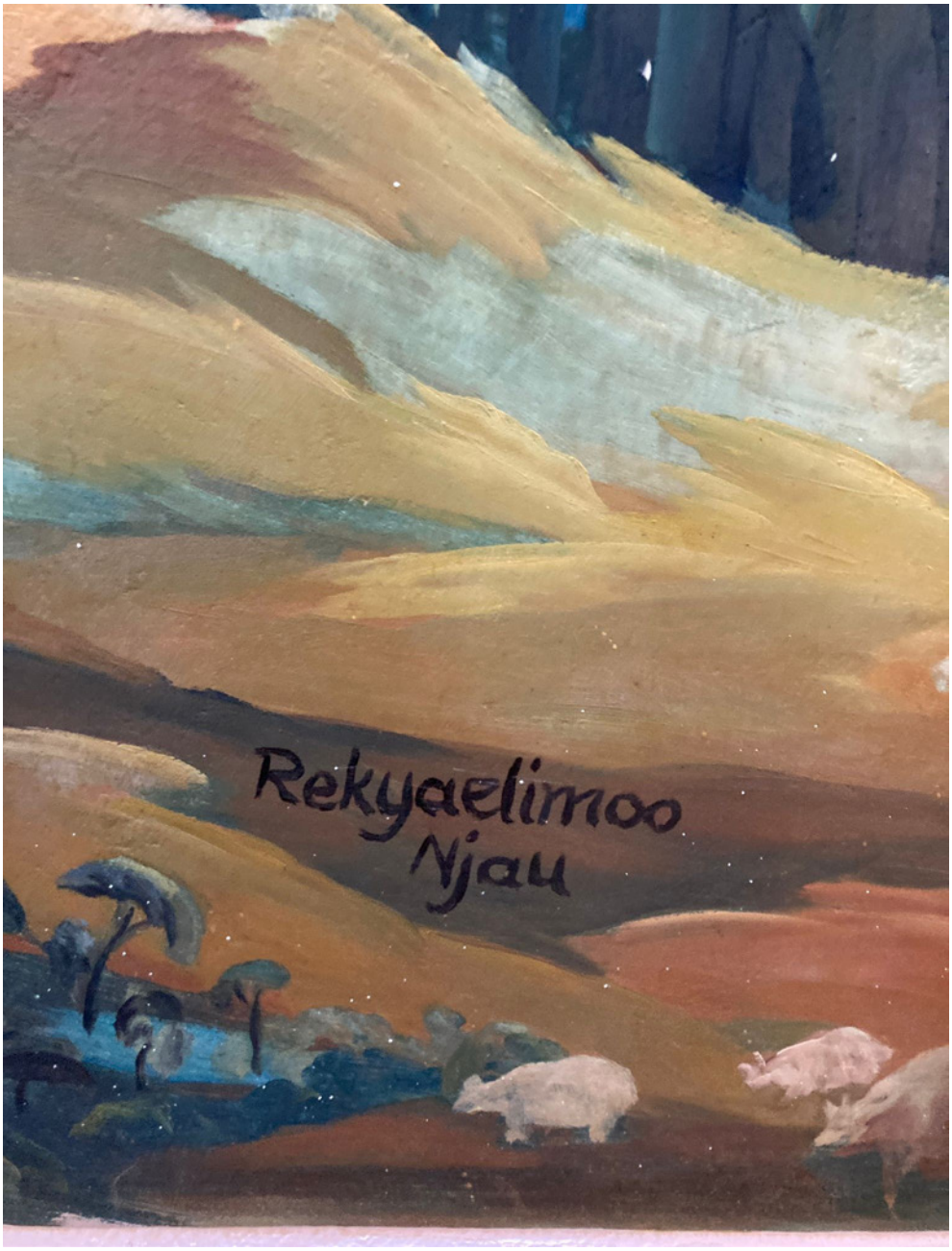

Fig. 8. Signature of Artist Elimo Njau, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 10.10.2023)

Fig. 9. Godfrey Githu Kafue, *Resurrection*, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 25. 08.2025)

Fig. 10. Godfrey Githu Kafue, *Doubting Thomas*, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 25. 08.2025)

Fig. 11. Godfrey Githu Kafue, *Road to Emaus*, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 25. 08.2025)

Fig. 12. Godfrey Githu Kafue, *Ascension*, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 25. 08.2025)

Fig. 13. Godfrey Githu Kafue, *Last Judgement*, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 25. 08.2025)

Fig. 14. Signature of Godfrey Githu Kafue, Murang'a, Anglican Memorial Cathedral of Saint James all Martyrs (picture by author 25. 08.2025)

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