

## Rationale behind Roman Catholic Church's toleration of miraa production and consumption in Igembe deanery, Meru diocese, Kenya

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### Abstract

This study sought to find out the rationale behind Roman Catholic Church's toleration of miraa production and consumption in Igembe Deanery, Meru diocese, Kenya. The Roman Catholic Church has been a leading voice in opposing the use of pharmaceuticals outside of medical necessity in every society it has encountered. The Roman Catholic Church has taken a hard-line approach against drug legalisation, including recreational drugs. On the contrary, in Igembe Deanery, the Meru Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church, a contentious drug that many consider a drug, khat (Miraa) production and use is tolerated. The study employed a descriptive research design. Data were obtained from questionnaires, oral interviews, focus group discussion, participant observation, and primary and secondary sources to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. The study's findings were that the economic, social, cultural, religious, and educational benefits of miraa in Igembe deanery are all the reasons for the Roman Catholic Church in Igembe deanery to tolerate miraa farming, trade and consumption in the study area. This study concludes that Miraa production and consumption in Igembe deanery in Meru diocese is due to its huge social, economic, and religious benefits to the local people.

**Key terms:** Rationale, Roman Catholic Church, miraa production, consumption.

## INTRODUCTION

Drugs are phenomena that are invading all societies in the world. Many international organisations and institutions are waging the fight against drug and alcohol misuse. There are a number of these organisations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), INTERPOL, the UNODC, and the World Federation Against Drugs (WFAD) (Nyamongo, 2014). Various churches are also engaged with various International Organisations and Government Agencies in combating drugs and substance abuse. They have developed various policies against drug use except on medical grounds only (Gorsuch, 1995). According to the RCC, it is a major violation to use it for other purposes rather than for medical purposes (Pontifical Council for Health and Pastoral Care, 2002). On the contrary, Roman Catholic Church, which is at the forefront in combating drug use except on therapeutic grounds, tolerates Khat production and consumption in Igembe Deanery, Meru Diocese, a drug affirmed by NACADA (2006&2007). Therefore, this study sought to establish the rationale behind the Roman Catholic Church's toleration of Miraa farming trade and consumption in Igembe Deanery, Meru Diocese.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Prominent religious leaders outside its home region have expressed their disapproval. Pentecostal denominations in Kenya are among the most vocal critics of Miraa, and they're not the only ones (Carrier, 2006). Adherence to total abstention from such substances by Pentecostal preachers and members of comparable denominations is required for salvation. In contrast, other denominations have a more relaxed stance concerning Miraa (Carrier, 2006). Despite Pentecostal churches' preaching abstinence on Miraa production and use, things are different in Igembe, where similar denominations strongly support Miraa production and consumption. They mainly do so by quoting the Gospel of Matthew 15:11-17, saying that what you think or say makes you unclean and not what you chew or eat (Carrier, 2006). Thus, it was necessary to establish the rationale behind the Roman Catholic Church's toleration of Miraa farming and use in Igembe Deanery, Meru Diocese, due to the fact that Roman Catholic Church in general, condemns drugs use except for therapeutic grounds, yet at the same time, the Church tolerates Miraa production and consumption in Igembe Deanery in Meru Diocese.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Economic Reasons

This research established that Miraa is the backbone of the economy of the people of Igembe. The Church has tolerated the production and consumption of Miraa in Igembe Deanery in Meru Diocese due to its huge economic benefits to the local people (Meeme, 2021, OI). All the informants affirmed that Miraa farming and trade is the main economic activity of the Igembe region. For instance, of all the priests interviewed, 10 (100%) affirmed that Miraa is the main source of livelihood for the people of Igembe. They acknowledged that Miraa has the highest returns compared to all other types of crops that have ever been grown in the region. All the priests, 10 (100%) and the catechists, 8 (100%), who are the key religious leaders in Igembe Deanery, affirmed that Miraa is the cash crop of the Igembe region, just like tea, coffee, sisal, tobacco and others are in other parts of Kenya. They elucidated that Miraa has acquired a new status in Igembe Deanery as 'Green Gold' of the people of the Igembe region where Igembe Deanery falls. The researcher noted that all the economic developments in the Igembe area traced their success and growth from Miraa farming and trade. Thus, the main reason why the Roman Catholic Church in Igembe Deanery, Meru Diocese, has continued to tolerate this trend of Miraa farming and trade among its members and, by extension, the wider Miraa production and business are due to its huge economic benefits. The Church has, openly encouraged her followers to be involved in the Miraa activities (Mutura, 2021, OI) due to the following economic reasons raised by the field research.

### Miraa is the Main Cash Crop in Igembe Deanery

Miraa is the primary income source for the inhabitants of Igembe Deanery in Meru Diocese, according to all respondents (priests, catechists, elders, traders, and church members). This makes it the most treasured crop by the members of the Roman Catholic Church in Igembe Deanery, generating income which they, in turn, use for the Church's development and survival. During the field interview by the researcher, it was established that, indeed, this assertion was true since the researcher, in his visits to the area, observed that most of the farms in the Igembe region, including those of the Churches, had Miraa.

As the main cash crop in the Igembe region, Miraa farming, trade and consumption are tolerated by the Roman Catholic Church in Igembe Deanery, Meru Diocese, because it is the major source of livelihood for the people (Mwiti, 2021, OI). In addition, it provides employment opportunities to the people of Igembe Deanery (Mutura, 2021, OI). Most people in Igembe have Miraa farms. There are many vehicles for transporting Miraa produce to various markets throughout the country and business stalls of Miraa in the Igembe region. This study established that Miraa is the main source of income for the people of Igembe, which has led to tremendous development and growth in the religious, economic and education sectors as well as in various aspects of human life. Therefore, this study established that the Roman Catholic Church in Igembe Deanery, Meru Diocese tolerates Miraa farming, trade and consumption because it is the main source of income for the people of Igembe, which has the highest income.

This study shows that all of the priests, 10 (100%), affirmed that Miraa is good as it is the source of livelihood for the people of Igembe. In addition, the entire priest acknowledged that Miraa was good as it improved the living standards of the people in the Igembe region. Further findings show that 7 (70%) of the catechists said Miraa is important for cultural values. They also opined that Miraa is important for religious significance. Just as the priests had affirmed, all the catechists 8 (100%) said that Miraa is important because it is the source of livelihood and also it is important for its economic significance to the people and the church in the Igembe region.

### Supporting Evangelisation

Data from various respondents showed that the Roman Catholic Church tolerates Miraa's production, trade and consumption since the church uses it to help spread the gospel. This could also explain why most Roman Catholic Churches in the Igembe region have Miraa farms in their compounds. Moreover, the money got from the sale of Miraa, once it is given by Christians as tithes and offerings, helps the Church in evangelisation (Kananu, 2021, OI). The church members also reported that Miraa could be sold to help in purchasing church instruments. This was seen

to be very crucial to the members since it took away the burden of contributing money to purchase the items.

The catechists 6 (80%) raised an issue where the Church in Igembe Deanery has suffered so much financially due to a fall in Miraa sales in recent years since it was banned in various countries. Miraa traders have faced the challenge of a lack of markets which has affected the church's ministry because there is a decrease in tithes and offerings as the churches mainly rely on contributions from Miraa income. The catechists, 7 (90%), also said that Miraa production's challenges have led to a decline in members' church support. This has, in turn, affected the spread of the gospel, which is supported by the income from Miraa.

On Miraa traders, most of the respondents, 8 (80%), said that their churches owned Miraa plantations, while the least group 2 (20%) said that their churches did not own a Miraa plantation. This study further shows that most of the elders who accounted for 8 (80%) owned Miraa plantations, while a few of them 2 (20%) did not own a Miraa plantation. I, as the researcher, agreed 100% that churches owned a Miraa plantation. Furthermore, the researcher noted that the Roman Catholic Church in Igembe Deanery, Meru Diocese tolerates Miraa farming, trade, and consumption; various churches in the region have Miraa farms which they sold and got money to enhance evangelisation through Igembe Deanery.

### Construction of the Churches

It was observed that the church normally conducts fundraising to build infrastructures like the church buildings, priests' houses and even residential rented apartments as part of the income needed by the Roman Catholic Church in Igembe Deanery. Because of this, the church has always accepted Miraa in its funds drive to raise money for undertaking such projects. Miraa could always be brought by church members and/or obtained from the church's Miraa farm. In this study, most of the catechists 4 (44.4%) responded by saying that the Miraa fund was used in buying more plots, while a few of them 2 (22.2%) said that Miraa was used to improve the living standards of the people in the society. In addition, another group that accounted for 3 (33.3%) said that Miraa income was used to invest

in other income-generating projects that supported the construction of various local churches.

The findings of this study showed that most of the elders 8 (80%) said that Miraa farming and trading had enhanced the expansion of the church. In comparison, the minority group 2 (20%) responded by saying that the expansion of the church was not a result of Miraa farming and trading. Moreover, the study also showed that most of the priests 8 (81.8%) said that Miraa farming and trading had enhanced the expansion of the church. However, a few of the priest 2 (18.2%) said that Miraa consumption and production does not enhance the expansion of the church.

### **Building Schools and Hospitals**

The Roman Catholic Church has been at the forefront in the construction of schools and hospitals to enhance the provision of social services to the people since colonial times. The respondents reported that Miraa is encouraged by the Roman Catholic Church in Igembe Deanery in Meru Diocese since the money obtained from its sales is used to help construct educational and health centres. The church has constructed many primary and secondary schools and various health mission hospitals through funds obtained from Miraa production in the deanery. This study shows that most of the priests, 7 (72.2%), said that Miraa enhances the expansion of the church economically. Still, a few of the priests 1 (9.1%) said that Miraa enhances the expansion of the church in other ways rather than economically and socially. However, some of them, who accounted for 2 (18.2%), said that Miraa enhanced the expansion of the church socially.

This study showed that 8 (81.8%) of the priests agreed that the church grows Miraa on its own, while just a few, 2 (18.2%), said that the church does not grow Miraa on its own. This study shows that 253 (84.2%) of the church members strongly agreed that the church had put up permanent structures from Miraa income, while a few of them, 1 (0.4%), just agreed on that. However, 1 (0.4%) disagreed and said the church had not put up permanent structures from Miraa income. It is evident from these findings that most of the church buildings in Igembe Deanery have been constructed using the proceeds from Miraa. Because

of this, the church has supported Miraa production and trade among its members.

### **Social Reasons**

This section discusses the major social reason that has influenced the Roman Catholic Church to tolerate the production and consumption of Miraa in Igembe Deanery, Meru Diocese. The social reasons raised from the field were: reconciliation, marriage negotiations, social interaction, and reference to the Ameru ancestors as well as the closing of paths leading to a person's homestead or farm. The majority of the respondents, 289 (95.4%), raised social factors as one of the reasons why the church in Igembe Deanery tolerates Miraa. The social reason that has made Roman Catholic Church tolerate Miraa production and consumption are discussed below.

### **Reconciliation**

The data collected demonstrate that the residents of Igembe Deanery use Miraa to reconcile people and solve emanating disputes within the region. The respondents in this study reported that if there was a conflict between two or more parties in the church, the offending party could bring Miraa to the offended party as a truce and a sign of peace. This means that Miraa is crucial in solving disputes and promoting peace in the community among the followers of the Roman Catholic Church in Igembe Deanery, Meru Diocese, hence the reason for its toleration by the church. For instance, most Miraa farmers, 8 (80%) said that they use Miraa to heal rifts with their friends, while the minority group that accounted for 20% said that they do not use Miraa to heal rifts with their friends. Most priests, 8 (81.8%), said that the church solves conflicts arising from Miraa farming and trade, while a few of the priests, 2 (18.2%), said that churches do not solve conflicts arising from Miraa farming and trade. Thus, it is evident that in the Igembe region, Miraa plays a significant role in reconciliation and promoting peace.

### **Marriage Negotiations**

Among the Igembe people, marriage institution is important, just like in other African communities. Based on the African-Christian belief, it was reported that it was important for every Igembe man and woman to marry. This was marked by several preparations and ceremonies, including negotiations.

It was established that most of the members of the Catholic Church in the Igembe deanery, as other members of the community, used Miraa as a form of negotiation when seeking a girl's hand in marriage.

This study's findings showed that most of the priests, 9 (90.9%), said that the use of Miraa in marriage negotiations enables the rich and the poor to get an opportunity to get married. Thus marriage was the rhythm of life and the institution instituted by God. Therefore, Miraa (Nicolo), used in marriage negotiations' stroke an equilibrium between the rich and the poor as all had equal opportunities to get married. This is because if you gave the father of the girl Miraa (Nicolo), you were allowed by her father to marry her even if you had nothing else. According to 10 (100%) of the priests, the use of Miraa in marriage negotiations brings people together.

### Social Interaction

Miraa is essential in bringing the Igembe people together. During the observation schedule by the researcher, it was established most residents of the study area normally interacted together while chewing Miraa at various Miraa joints in the deanery. Most of these people informed the researcher that just like any social activity, they chew Miraa together as a form of socialisation, which helps to bring them together. While they do this, they noted that they normally discussed the social, economic and religious affairs of Igembe Deanery as Christians chew Miraa at their will. This study shows that 6 (60%) priests said that using Miraa promotes social interaction because as people chew in groups, it brings them together. In contrast, the minority, 4 (40%), said that as people chew Miraa, they exchange ideas, promoting social interaction.

### Religious Reasons

During the field interviews, the researcher established the Igembe people of the Roman Catholic Church used Miraa to remember or refer to their ancestors. For example, Material (2021, OI), one of the respondents, reported that *Maine* was used to refer to the first Ameru ancestor who planted Miraa on his homestead. It was also established that *Maine* is considered among the respondents as the best Miraa in the Igembe culture. This is because *Maine* Miraa is used to revere the Igembe ancestors of *Maine* and *Nagi*. This study shows that 253 (83%) church members strongly

agreed that the church tolerates using Miraa because of the link between the ancestors and Miraa. However, at the same time, a few of them, 1 (0.4) disagreed that, a clear indication that the people of Igembe used Miraa for religious reasons symbolising a link to ancestor hood. Other religious reasons mainly focused on the church members calling to support the church ministry. These included:

### Offering Church Service through Offerings and Tithes

Most respondents reported that the church tolerates Miraa's production, trade and consumption in Igembe Deanery since Christians give Miraa to the church as offerings and tithes. For instance, 7 (88.9%) of the catechists said that church members gave tithes and offerings from Miraa income. In comparison, only 1 (11.1%) catechist said that church members did not give tithes and offerings from Miraa income. 9 (90.9%) priests aver that most of what the Church gets from Christians as tithes and offerings come from Miraa sales. As such, the priests cannot condemn Miraa. Only 1 (9.1%) said that he does not allow tithes and offerings from Miraa proceeds, which was doubtful as the people of Igembe cannot allow any priest against Miraa to serve them, as affirmed by Muturia (2021, OI).

Further, the findings indicate that 8 (80%) of the elders who formed the majority gave tithes to the church from Miraa income. In comparison, 2 (20%) of the elderly respondents did not give tithes from the Miraa income to the church. 8 (80%) of the Miraa farmers' respondents affirmed that they gave tithes and offerings to the church from Miraa income, while 2 (20%) gave a contrary view. Therefore, 254 (99.6%) Christians said they get the offerings and tithes they give to the Church from Miraa income. This indicates that the Church in Igembe Deanery gets its income from Miraa, which explains why this Church has tolerated Miraa's activities.

### Supporting the Priesthood

Supporting the priesthood is one of the key responsibilities of a Roman Catholic Christian (Meeme, 2021, OI). Most Roman Catholic priests interviewed claimed that a portion of the Deanery's maintenance costs is covered by Miraa farming and trade. Most of the time, members sold their Miraa and then gave the money obtained to the priests to get their basic upkeep items. To a greater extent, some of them got

their vehicles purchased to them by the church members through the sales of Miraa (Kananu, 2021, OI). A large number of priests<sup>8</sup> (80%) said that Miraa proceeds are used to support church projects.

In contrast, the rest,<sup>2</sup> (20%), said that Miraa proceeds were used to build the church, maintain the priests, facilitate the spread of the gospel and buy vehicles for the priests. 7 (70%) Miraa farmers said that Miraa proceeds are used to support church projects and build churches. However, a few of them, 3 (30%), said that the proceeds are used in maintaining the priests. This indicates that income from Miraa plays a vital role in supporting the priests' work. This explains why the Church in this region supports Miraa activities.

### Supporting Seminars, Crusades and Youth Seminars

The data collected demonstrated that the Roman Catholic Church tolerated the use of Miraa in the Deanery since the crop could be sold, and the money obtained could be used to finance church programs like holding seminars, crusades and youth seminars. The findings show that 7 (88.9%) of the catechists said that income from Miraa is used for buying music instruments and financing youth, Sunday School and women's activities. 9 (90.9%) priests agreed the income from Miraa is used for supporting church activities such as conferences, seminars and others. This explains why the Church in Igembe Deanery continues to tolerate Miraa production and trade.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

**Conclusions:** This study concludes that Miraa is the main source of income for the people of Igembe in Meru County. This makes it the most available, useful and reliable crop that the Catholic Church uses to generate income for mission work and general church development. This is why the Roman Catholic Church

in Igembe Deanery tolerates Miraa production, trade and consumption. As the main cash crop in the Igembe region, Miraa forms the economic base of the inhabitants of this area. As a result, persons, institutions or organisations, the Church included, cannot take it lightly. Therefore, the researcher can conclude that Miraa production and consumption in Igembe Deanery in Meru Diocese is due to its huge social, economic, and religious benefits to the local people. This explains why the Roman Catholic Church in Igembe Deanery has continued to tolerate this trend among its members and, by extension, the wider population of Meru Diocese.

**Recommendations:** The Governments needs to develop various policies on Miraa production and consumption, which would promote Miraa Industry. The Religious Organizations', which intends to establish their religious institutions in Igembe Region, Meru County, need to understand the rationale behind the Roman Catholic Church's toleration of Miraa production and consumption In Igembe Region. Also, the churches in Igembe Region, Meru County needs to incorporate financial managements in their teachings so as to enable their church members to make good use of the income from Miraa production. In addition, the churches in Africa need to enhance efficient and effective Christianity in Africa by embracing inculturation of Christianity in Africa. This will make Christianity as an African religion but not as an alien religion in African society. Finally, the church institutions in Africa need to study various plants in African communities, which constitutes a major aspect of the African culture and religious heritage both as living things, endowed with certain attributes and unique vital forces that influence human life.

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