

ABSTRACT

Rites of passage are a universal phenomenon marked by transitions during major life changes. In the Nomiya Church (NC), circumcision and baptism as religious rites of initiation are simultaneously performed on the male infant on the eighth day after birth whereas the female infant gets baptism on the fourteenth day, thus presenting the double rite of passage. The NC as the first African Initiated Church (AIC) in Kenya started among the Luo people, a community that traditionally did not practice circumcision. The NC stands unique in its practice of the double rite of passage which is evidently a reversal of the decision of the first Church Council of AD 49 at Jerusalem, which settled for baptism rather than circumcision as the Christian initiation rite. This study questions the continued relevance of circumcision to the theology of the NC if baptism is the sign of the new covenant. The overall objective of this study was to investigate the socio-cultural and theological context of the double rite of passage in the NC. The specific objectives were: to examine the socio-cultural basis for the double rite of passage in the NC, to evaluate the theological context of the double rite of passage in the NC, and to examine socio-theological issues in the double rite of passage as a basis for gender disparity in the NC. The conceptual framework adopted called 'appropriation dialogue' is the biblical concept of covenant. Covenant entails mutual reciprocity whereby God moves to establish a relationship with human beings, who in return respond in obedience as they appropriate the gifts from God. The research design was explanatory. Rarieda Sub-County was purposively sampled. The study population was the NC leaders and members from Rarieda Sub-County in Siaya County, Kenya. The accessible population was NC membership in eight dioceses sampled out of the fourteen in Rarieda Sub-County. Simple random sampling was used to get the eight dioceses. A sample of 345 NC leaders and baptized members formed the respondents. Purposive sampling was used to sample 113 church leaders who included: the Archbishop, bishops, clergy, lay readers, senior lay members, and women representatives. Snowball sampling was used to sample 232 baptized adherents. The baptized members were male and female, aged eighteen years and above. Methods of data collection for this study were Key Informant Interviews (KII), self-administered questionnaires, observation and focus group discussions. The research instruments were interview schedule, questionnaire, observation schedule and discussion schedule. Qualitative data was thematically summarized for specific patterns. Quantitative data was given by the numerical socio-demographic statistics. This study has shown that the practice of the double rite of passage is at the core of the NC theology as revealed in the socio-cultural and theological aspects of the NC worship. The double rite of passage in a patriarchal society prescribes a system of social structures that promote gender disparity. The double rite of passage is unique to the NC in the manner it represents the total religious life of the NC adherents. The double rite of passage as a hybrid of elements from several religious faiths provides the community with a channel to transmit its core values to the initiates. This study recommends that the double rite of passage that defines what it means to be a member of NC should be strengthened through healing in the leadership and body of adherents to ensure the church remains relevant. This study is of academic significance as it highlights new findings on the role of the double rite of passage in strengthening the NC faith in the Old Testament biblical teachings.