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Beyond Death: Theology, Israelite Identity, And Angelic Transformation in Kenya's Lost Israelite Religious Movement

Beldine Dorine Akinyi Watta[1], Naila G. Napoo[2], Hezekiah Obwoge[3]

[1,2,3]Department of Social Studies, School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Bondo, Kenya

ABSTRACT: This article examines the religious beliefs and eschatological thought of the Lost Israelites Religious Movement (LIRM), an African new religious movement founded by Jehovah Wanyonyi in Western Kenya and now centred in Chemororoch Village, Uasin Gishu County. Although the movement has drawn periodic press attention, often in a tone of ridicule, its belief system has not been documented from the perspective of its adherents. The study adopted a qualitative ethnographic design within a single-case framework. Fieldwork conducted between July and September 2024 generated data from 45 participants through 16 key informant interviews, seven semi-structured interviews and four focus group discussions, supported by participant observation and document review. Data were analysed thematically under the guidance of James Cox's interpretive phenomenological approach and Max Weber's sociology of theodicy. Four interlocking beliefs emerged. First, Wanyonyi is understood as a sovereign and ever-present divine being whose power evokes both fear and protection. Second, adherents hold an exclusive Israelite identity that is enacted bodily through dress, posture and separation from "people of the world." Third, death is reconceived as angelic transformation, expressed in the prohibition of mourning and the use of sitting coffins, while illness is addressed through sacrifice rather than biomedical care. Fourth, the promise of life "on top of the waters" offers a concrete afterlife free from disease, poverty and death. The article argues that these beliefs work together as a theodicy that turns marginalisation, illness and mortality into signs of imminent deliverance, which helps to explain the movement's persistence after the loss of its founder. The findings also carry implications for public health engagement with the community.

KEYWORDS: Lost Israelites, new religious movements, eschatology, theodicy, African Israelite identity, interpretive phenomenology, Kenya

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**Corresponding Author: Beldine Dorine Akinyi Watta*

1. INTRODUCTION

Africa has been among the most productive sites of religious innovation in the modern world. Barrett's (1968) survey of six thousand independent religious movements and Sundkler's (1961) study of Zulu prophetic churches established early that African Christians did not simply receive mission Christianity but reworked it in light of their own experiences, cosmologies and needs. Western Kenya has been especially fertile ground for such reworking. Movements such as Dini ya Msambwa, the Africa Israel Church Nineveh, the Nomiya Luo Mission and the Roho churches combined biblical motifs with African religious sensibilities and, in several cases, with forms of protest against colonial and postcolonial marginalisation (Anderson, 2001; Wipper, 1977).

The Lost Israelites Religious Movement (LIRM), founded by Jehovah Wanyonyi, belongs to this regional genealogy but occupies a distinctive place within it. Its adherents claim descent from the Lost Tribes of Israel, regard their founder as God rather than as a prophet, offer burnt sacrifices of flour and Tusker beer, and teach that their members do not die but are transformed into angels. The movement has attracted intermittent media coverage, much of it treating its claims as curiosities (Ominde, 2020; Sitole, 2011). What is missing is a systematic account of what adherents themselves believe and how those beliefs hang together as a coherent religious world.

This article addresses that gap. It asks how LIRM adherents in Chemororoch Village understand the divine status of Jehovah Wanyonyi, construct and maintain their Israelite identity, interpret scripture, and conceive of death, illness and the afterlife.

Following Cox's (2006, 2010) interpretive phenomenological approach, the article treats these beliefs as religious data to be understood on adherents' own terms before any explanatory claims are advanced. It then reads the resulting picture through Weber's (1978) sociology of theodicy, asking what religious work these beliefs perform for a small, poor and socially marginal community. The central argument is that the LIRM's beliefs form an integrated theodicy in which suffering, sickness and death are not refutations of faith but confirmations of it. This helps to explain how the movement has persisted since the death of its founder in 2015, an event adherents interpret not as death but as disappearance or transformation (Ominde, 2020).

The article proceeds in six parts. It first situates the LIRM historically and reviews the scholarship on African Israelite movements. It then sets out the theoretical framework and the methodology. The findings are presented under six themes, followed by a discussion of the movement's beliefs as an integrated theodicy, and a conclusion.

2. THE LOST ISRAELITES RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT IN CONTEXT

Jehovah Wanyonyi is believed to have been born around 1924 in what is now Bungoma County and to have founded his movement in the mid-1950s. Local people came to call his followers *Basiraeli*, a rendering of "Israelites," although the movement has no formal connection with Judaism as practised by Jewish communities elsewhere. Popular accounts recall an episode in the 1980s in which followers fashioned wings from banana leaves in preparation for flight to God, an episode usually retold with mockery (Sitole, 2011). From the 1960s Wanyonyi claimed divine status, immortality and the power to heal. His crimson robe and red hat, his use of red as a symbol of the coming end, his dramatic re-enactments of the crucifixion at Christmas, and a liturgy built around burnt offerings of flour and beer together marked out a distinct religious world.

The movement's history is one of relocation. From Bungoma, Wanyonyi moved to Kimalewa, where he drew converts from the Bareefu clan of the Bukusu, and in 2002 he settled in Chemororoch Village, Soy Constituency, Uasin Gishu County, where the community remains. Chemororoch is a rural, agrarian settlement dominated by Bukusu clans and set within a religiously plural environment of mainstream denominations, African Independent Churches, Pentecostal ministries and newer prophetic movements. The movement maintains a central shrine that serves as its principal sacred and socially bounded space. The wider LIRM membership is locally estimated at about 700, with 200 to 300 adult adherents living within the Chemororoch enclave. Following Wanyonyi's death in 2015, leadership passed to a chief priest and an "earthly angel," supported by a hierarchy of priests, ushers, singers and ritual specialists. Adherents maintain that their founder is alive and will return (Ominde, 2020).

The LIRM did not emerge in a vacuum. Its Bukusu setting links it to Dini ya Msambwa, founded by Elijah Masinde in the 1940s, which combined Israelite self-identification with prophetic leadership and anti-colonial protest (Wipper, 1977). LIRM leaders nevertheless insist on their movement's uniqueness and distance it from other churches, a claim that is itself part of the belief system analysed below.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 African Israelite movements

Claims of Israelite descent circulate widely in sub-Saharan Africa. Bruder (2008) surveys movements such as the House of Israel in Ghana, the Abayudaya of Uganda and the Lemba of southern Africa, arguing that African Israelite identities arise where biblical literacy, colonial oppression and indigenous genealogical thinking meet. Parfitt (1997, 2002) has traced the Lemba case and the wider history of the Lost Tribes motif, showing how such claims function as counter-narratives to colonial and postcolonial ideologies of African inferiority. Bediako (1992) frames the broader problem as one of identity: African Christians have had to negotiate between the universal claims of the gospel and the particular histories of their own communities. These studies establish that Israelite identity in Africa is best read as active identity construction rather than as error to be corrected (Hall, 1996).

None of this scholarship, however, addresses the LIRM. Accounts of the movement remain journalistic, and its theology of divine identity, its reading of scripture and its eschatology have not been documented from an emic perspective. The LIRM is also unusual among African Israelite movements in claiming that its founder is God himself, not merely a prophet or messenger, and in teaching that death is a promotion into an angelic hierarchy. These features call for analysis on their own terms.

3.2 Millenarianism, compensation and the persistence of belief

Studies of millenarian movements provide a second body of relevant work. Cohn (2001) identifies eschatological urgency as a powerful generator of commitment. Barkun (1974) shows that millenarian belief systems often absorb disaster and adversity as signs of the coming end, which renders them resistant to falsification. Festinger, Riecken and Schachter (1956) documented how believers may emerge from disconfirming events with strengthened conviction. Worsley's (1968) study of Melanesian cargo cults shows how the recently dead may be recast as agents of a transformed future order. Stark and Bainbridge (1985) describe religious promises as compensators that respond to specific deprivations, while Wallis (1984) and Wilson (1970) show how world-rejecting and introversionist sects must build comprehensive internal worlds to sustain their separation from society. Each of these frameworks illuminates aspects of the LIRM, but each also risks reducing adherents' beliefs to functions before those beliefs have been understood.

3.3 Theoretical framework

The study therefore combines two resources. The first is James Cox's (2006, 2010) interpretive phenomenological approach. Cox retains the classical phenomenological commitment to suspending judgement about the truth of religious claims, but unlike descriptive phenomenology he insists that religious phenomena be returned to their social and historical contexts and that the researcher's interpretations be tested against adherents' own understandings. Applied here, the approach requires that claims such as Wanyonyi's metallic arms or the transformation of the dead be treated not as propositions to be tested for literal truth but as religious data whose internal logic and experiential force must first be mapped (Cox, 2010; Geertz, 1973).

The second resource is Max Weber's sociology of religion, in particular his analysis of charismatic authority and theodicy. Weber (1947) argues that attributing supernatural qualities to a leader is the basis of charismatic authority and of the unconditional commitment such authority demands. In *Economy and Society*, Weber (1978) treats theodicy, the religious explanation of why suffering exists and why the righteous suffer, as a central problem that every religion must address, and he identifies eschatological hope in a coming reversal of fortunes as one of its most common solutions among the disprivileged. Weber also asks how charismatic movements survive the loss of their founders. Cox supplies the method for understanding LIRM beliefs from within; Weber supplies the questions about what those beliefs do for a suffering community and how they sustain the movement after its founder.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach and an ethnographic design operationalised within a single-case framework bounded to the LIRM community in Chemororoch Village. Fieldwork took place between 2 July and 27 September 2024 across seven field visits. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball sampling, and sample adequacy was judged by thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2006). The final sample comprised 45 participants: 42 LIRM adherents and three external informants. Data were generated through 16 key informant interviews (11 religious leaders, four ritual specialists and one academic expert), seven semi-structured interviews (five ordinary adherents and two community elders), and four focus group discussions with 22 participants (long-term adherents; adult men; adult women; and recent converts and youth). These were complemented by participant observation of worship and sacrificial rites and by review of available documents.

Interviews and discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial codes were generated from adherents' own vocabulary, such as "transformation," "on top of the waters" and "people of the world," before being grouped into broader themes and compared with the literature. Each participant was assigned an alphanumeric code indicating method and category: KII-RL (key informant, religious leader), KII-RS (key informant, ritual specialist), SSI-OA (semi-structured interview, ordinary adherent) and FGD1 to FGD4 (focus groups, with LT, AM, AF and RY denoting long-term adherents, adult men, adult women, and recent converts and youth respectively). Quotations are presented verbatim to preserve adherents' own idiom.

The study received ethical clearance from the Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology Ethics Review Committee and a research licence from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Participants gave informed consent and were free to withdraw at any time. Sacred spaces were entered, and rituals observed or recorded, only with the permission of community leaders and the individuals concerned, and the researcher observed community norms, such as walking barefoot in the shrine. The first author approached the community as a Christian outsider and kept a reflexive journal throughout to monitor the influence of her own assumptions on data collection and interpretation.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Jehovah Wanyonyi as sovereign divine being

The foundational claim of the LIRM, the claim that gives coherence to every other belief, is that Jehovah Wanyonyi was not merely a prophet or charismatic leader but a divine being with sovereign power over creation, life, death and the cosmos. The assistant high priest expressed this power through a concrete and striking image:

> Jehovah is very powerful and must be feared and worshipped as a god because he has arms which are transformed into metallic state which he can use to kill everyone in the world (KII-RL-03, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

The interpretive phenomenologist's first task is not to ask whether world-destroying metallic arms are a credible cosmological possibility, but to ask what religious work the image performs within the speaker's system of meaning (Cox, 2010). The answer is explicit in the statement itself: the image grounds the obligation that Jehovah "must be feared and worshipped." Tremlin (2006) observes that the counter-intuitive properties attributed to supernatural beings, properties that violate ordinary expectations while remaining intelligible, are precisely what make such beings memorable and compelling. Metallic arms that can destroy the world are an example of such a property. The earthly angel described the emotional texture of this relationship:

> We cannot imagine seeing our god sad in any way, since when he gets annoyed, he can destroy the entire world in no second. Our god is very powerful and he has metallic wings which he can use to destroy the whole world (KII-RL-04, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

The phrase "we cannot imagine seeing our god sad" suggests that fear of divine displeasure is a central motive for worship, sacrifice and obedience. This orientation differs from the love-centred emphasis of much evangelical Christianity, while resonating with strands of the biblical tradition that stress divine wrath. One singer extended the consequences of that displeasure to the whole cosmos: "When he is annoyed and his arms bruise each other then there will be an everlasting fire here on earth" (KII-RL-08, September 2024, Chemororoch Village). In this account the fate of the world, not only the welfare of individual adherents, depends on keeping Jehovah's favour. Weber (1947) locates the source of charismatic authority in the attribution of extraordinary powers to a leader; here that attribution is raised to the level of cosmic sovereignty, and the commitment it generates is correspondingly total.

Divine sovereignty, however, is not only threat. The representative of God described Wanyonyi as an active and present governor of the world:

> Our god lives on top of water and will take us with him when he returns and his return becomes nearer when people are faced with more calamities. Our god Jehovah Wanyonyi has the spirit that is currently controlling the whole world and human beings live under his metallic arms (KII-RL-01, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

Wanyonyi is not a deity who withdrew after founding the movement. His spirit governs the world in the present tense, and his physical absence since 2015 is understood as residence elsewhere, "on top of water," rather than as death. The image of humanity living "under his metallic arms" holds protection and threat together. Van der Leeuw (1938) identified this ambivalence of power, at once sheltering and dangerous, as a characteristic feature of the sacred, and the LIRM image expresses it with unusual vividness. It also makes Wanyonyi a personally engaged figure whose power is available for healing and protection, which, as Stark and Bainbridge (1985) note, greatly increases a divine figure's appeal to communities in practical distress.

5.2 The construction and embodiment of Israelite identity

The second foundation of LIRM belief is the conviction that adherents are true descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel and that this identity confers special standing in the divine order. The assistant high priest stated the claim with notable economy:

> The Bible calls us the Israelites; we are lost because we are chosen, we are special people, we have the truth and we do not move with a crowd (KII-RL-03, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

The statement turns on a paradox: the movement is lost *because* it is chosen. Lostness, which might signify abandonment, becomes a mark of election, and social distance from the majority ("we do not move with a crowd") becomes evidence of possessing the truth. A focus group of long-term adherents drew out the boundary this identity requires: "We do not mix with other people of the world because they will [defile] us. We are the chosen people of Jehovah" (FGD1-LT-01, September 2024, Chemororoch Village). The concern with defilement draws on the Levitical purity tradition that LIRM leaders cite as scriptural authority, so that separation from outsiders is understood not merely as social self-protection but as a spiritual discipline required of a holy people. A first overseer added the claim of exclusivity:

> We are different, we are unique. People must understand that we are the only chosen Israelites in Kenya to draw people to god. Our church was founded on uniqueness (KII-RL-05, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

In Bediako's (1992) terms, the LIRM resolves the tension between the universal and the particular by appropriating the universal biblical motif of election and applying it exclusively to a Kenyan community. In Parfitt's (2002) terms, it inverts colonial and postcolonial narratives of African inferiority by placing an African community at the centre of sacred history. Wallis (1984) observes that movements claiming exclusive access to divine truth tend to develop comprehensive belief systems because their exclusivity obliges them to answer every challenge posed by surrounding alternatives. The comprehensiveness of the LIRM's religious world, documented in the sections that follow, is consistent with that observation.

Israelite identity is not only professed; it is performed in the body. Bell (1992) argues that ritual practices do not simply express pre-existing identities but help to create them. A ritual specialist described the obligatory religious symbol worn with white worship attire:

> We have a crucifix which must be obeyed by all the adherents of the movement. The crucifix is the new sword of Jehovah which the adherents must have in their white attires used during worship (KII-RS-02, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

Within the movement's own framework the crucifix, reinterpreted as "the new sword of Jehovah," signals the distinct authority of the Kenyan God rather than a borrowed Christian emblem. Requiring every adherent to wear it turns dressing for worship into a bodily enactment of belonging. The same specialist described the posture required in prayer: "During prayers they have to kneel on a mat and drumming must be done by the drummers when kneeling on the ground bare chested" (KII-RS-02, September 2024, Chemororoch Village). Turner (1969) identifies the removal or modification of ordinary dress as a feature of liminal ritual states, in which markers of everyday status are set aside so that transformation can occur. The drummers' bare chests can be read in this light, and adherents in focus group discussions linked drumming directly to the process of transformation discussed below. An ordinary adherent summarised the point:

> Being an Israelite is not just something we say. We live differently from other people. The way we dress, worship and obey Jehovah's teachings reminds us every day that we belong to God's chosen people (SSI-OA-05, August 2024, Chemororoch Village).

5.3 Scripture, received teaching and the place of doubt

The LIRM's use of the Bible follows a dual strategy. The first is a literal but highly selective reading that privileges Old Testament law, purity codes and sacrificial procedure while setting aside New Testament teaching that presents sacrifice as fulfilled in Christ. This allows burnt offerings to be understood as continuing obedience to Levitical law rather than as obsolete practice. The second is an eschatological inversion in which biblical themes of exile and restoration are read through a local lens: Chemororoch and its surroundings become the setting of Zion, and mainstream, Western-oriented Christianity is cast as having departed from the truth. The high priest stated the governing principle:

> We do what Jehovah told us and gave us the ten commandments of Moses. We get our teachings from Matthew, Leviticus 1:1 and Numbers 15:17-18 and our teachings are the very teachings. No one should look down on us because we already have the word and we do not have to come up with new teachings because we already have the word and it is sinful to dilute what was originally taught in our hearts (KII-RL-02, August 2024, Chemororoch Village).

The cited passages are telling. Leviticus 1 sets out the law of the burnt offering, and Numbers 15:17–18 introduces offerings to be made on entering the promised land. Scripture thus supplies precedents for the movement's central rites, while the assertion that "we already have the word" closes the received teaching to revision. W. C. Smith's (1998) distinction between cumulative tradition and personal faith is useful here: the teaching is described as already "taught in our hearts," a living inner reality rather than a text requiring continuing interpretation. Bleeker (1963) urged phenomenologists to attend to such hermeneutical principles because they reveal as much about a community as the content of its interpretations.

Hermeneutical closure at the official level did not, however, eliminate individual reflection. One usher offered a candid admission:

> Sometimes I ask myself whether the teachings we teach in LIRM are true. Sometimes they don't seem to be true. Personally, I sometimes get into a dilemma (KII-RL-10, 2024, Chemororoch Village).

From an interpretive phenomenological standpoint, this is among the most valuable data the fieldwork produced. It resists both of the simplified narratives an external account might impose: that adherents are uniformly credulous, or that leaders cynically manipulate them. Cox's (2010) insistence on taking emic self-description seriously requires that this respondent's experience, a genuine dilemma rather than settled certainty or calculated deception, be allowed to stand. The usher continued to hold office and to teach, suggesting a pattern of private questioning alongside public commitment that is likely to be more common in bounded religious communities than official discourse admits.

Leaders were also conscious of how new religious movements are perceived in Kenya. The high priest remarked: "I really wonder why people have come up in different churches lying to people with false teachings, in fact people like Mackenzie of Shakahola must be arrested" (KII-RL-02, August 2024, Chemororoch Village). The spontaneous reference to the Shakahola deaths in Kilifi County, in which followers of Paul Mackenzie's Good News International Church died after prolonged fasting, shows leaders actively distinguishing the LIRM from movements publicly associated with harm. The charge of false teaching is directed outwards while the movement's own teaching is exempted, reproducing the in-group and out-group logic that structures its relationship to the wider religious field.

5.4 Death as angelic transformation

The most distinctive element of LIRM eschatology is its reconception of death as angelic transformation rather than biological ending. A focus group of adult women gave the fullest account:

> In our church people do not die; instead, people are transformed into more powerful beings and placed in the leadership ranks of the movement as angels and they watch over their family members. There is nothing like the fear of death in this movement. Actually, the more the cases of transformation in this church the more advantageous it is to the church because the angels increase in number (FGD3-AF-02, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

Three features stand out. First, transformation is active: the transformed person is placed in the leadership ranks of the movement as an angel and continues to participate in its hierarchy. Second, the transformed maintain protective relationships with living kin, so that communal bonds extend across the boundary of death. Third, and most strikingly, the deaths of members are understood as beneficial, because each transformation enlarges the movement's heavenly congregation. What an outside observer would regard as a demographic vulnerability is reinterpreted as a religious asset, a striking instance of the belief consolidation that Festinger et al. (1956) documented in movements facing apparent disconfirmation.

This belief resonates with, and departs from, the African understanding of the "living-dead" described by Mbiti (1969), in which deceased relatives remain active in family life for as long as they are personally remembered before receding into the anonymous company of the spirits. The LIRM institutionalises this continuity. The transformed dead do not depend on personal memory; they acquire permanent, ranked positions as angels within the movement's own organisation, so that its leadership includes both the visible living and the invisible transformed in a single chain of authority. Read alongside Worsley's (1968) account of Melanesian movements that recast the recently dead as agents of a coming order, the LIRM's eschatology appears as a local variant of a recurring pattern in which the boundary between living and dead dissolves in the service of hope for imminent reversal.

The belief governs grief. A junior usher explained the prohibition on mourning:

> Why mourn? Even the big prophets of Jehovah, prophet Jeremiah did not mourn and did not even attend weddings or even burial ceremonies. Look at Job in the Bible, he lost everything but never mourned because he had the word of Jehovah in his heart. Mourning in our church is not allowed at all! That is an abomination! (KII-RL-11, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

The appeal to Jeremiah draws on a real biblical precedent, the prophet's instruction not to enter a house of mourning or of feasting (Jeremiah 16:5–9). The appeal to Job is a selective reading, since the biblical Job tears his robe and laments, yet it highlights what adherents take to be the essence of his faithfulness: steadfastness in loss. In either case, the suppression of grief is not emotional denial but the highest expression of conviction, a lived demonstration that the dead have not in fact died.

The same logic shapes mortuary practice. The representative of God described the use of sitting coffins:

> On transformation, we place such people in sitting coffins in preparation for their journey. We do not lay them down like ordinary corpses because they are not dead; they are sitting upright as leaders who are ready to take up their positions in the army of angels on top of the waters (KII-RL-01, August 2024, Chemororoch Village).

If the deceased has been transformed rather than having died, the fitting posture is not the horizontal posture of a corpse but the upright posture of one ready to assume office. The sitting coffin is therefore a theological statement made in material form, an embodied assertion that what society calls death is, within the movement, a form of living. As Bell (1992) argues, mortuary practices are among the most consequential applications of a community's religious framework, because they concern the treatment of the body at the moment of greatest significance.

5.5 Illness, sacrifice and healing

The transformation belief carries direct consequences for how the community responds to illness. A ritual specialist explained:

> Followers of Jehovah who fall sick never seek medical attention and instead give out their animals to the high priest to offer as sacrifice and pray for them. Although feeling unwell, we are convinced that Jehovah is soon returning to take us. When he returns, he has to take his people with him the way they are and women are therefore not allowed to wear inner pants. When a man gets to the stage of transformation, he should not be buried with his inner pants but on earth he has to wear his inner pants (KII-RS-03, August 2024, Chemororoch Village).

Within this worldview, illness is understood less as a biomedical condition requiring treatment than as part of the preparation for transformation, and sacrificial prayer is therefore the appropriate response. The detailed rules about bodily condition at the moment of Jehovah's return show how far the eschatology reaches into the most intimate areas of daily life. The adult women's focus group went further, presenting illness itself as an eschatological sign:

> An increase in the number of sick people is advantageous to our church, we do not take them for medical attention in hospitals, instead we offer burnt offerings of flour and tusker drink because Jehovah likes the smell and the high priest who offers the sacrifices prays for them. The more we offer sacrifices, the better it is for our church. This is a clear indication that our god Jehovah is soon returning (FGD3-AF-02, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

Barkun (1974) identifies precisely this interpretation, in which calamity confirms rather than disconfirms millenarian expectation, as the main mechanism by which such belief systems resist falsification. Healing, meanwhile, is accessed through a precise sacrificial procedure. The first ritual specialist stressed its conditional character: "For Jehovah to accept our sacrifices and answer our prayers, we have to go with an animal for sacrifice and a tusker drink" (KII-RS-01, September 2024, Chemororoch Village). He added that "if you come empty-handed, the fire will not catch the heavens. Jehovah demands that the animal and the drink are present at the altar, otherwise the high priest is just shouting into the wind" (KII-RS-01, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

Participant observation confirmed the procedure. During a session in September 2024 the ritual leader stood and moved to the altar of sacrifice, holding a bottle of Tusker beer in his left hand and continuously mixing it, with a spoon held in his right hand, into flour already burning on the altar (field notes, September 2024). The same specialist explained the choice of beer: "We use tusker beer brand because it has a sweet smell which appeases our god. The drink is poured on the flour which has to be mixed with margarine and is burnt on the altar" (KII-RS-01, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

The appeal to a "sweet smell" echoes the Levitical language of offerings that are a pleasing aroma to the Lord, the very texts the high priest cited as the movement's authority. Substituting a locally available commercial beer for the biblical libation illustrates the creative localisation of biblical practice that Maxwell (2006) and Anderson (2001) observe across African independent and Pentecostal Christianity, in which local materials are found to carry the logic of biblical rites. The precision of the procedure (left hand, right hand, flour already burning) reflects the common sacrificial principle that efficacy depends on correct performance and not only on the intention of the offerer (Van der Leeuw, 1938). W. C. Smith (1998) reminds us that living faith expresses itself in concrete practices rather than abstract propositions; for LIRM adherents, trust in Jehovah's healing power is inseparable from the ritual by which that power is approached.

5.6 Life on top of the waters

The eschatological promise that most clearly motivates adherents is that of life "on top of the waters." The representative of God described it in concrete terms:

> Our god lives on top of water and will take us with him when he returns. There is a heaven on top of the water where he lives with his wives and children. It is another location on top of the waters where one who has been transformed lives. It is a place free from the suffering of this world, free from diseases, poverty, and death (KII-RL-01, 2024, Chemororoch Village).

The promised afterlife is not an abstract spiritual state but a located community that reproduces the familiar structure of household life, with Jehovah living among his wives and children, while removing the three afflictions that most shape adherents' present lives: disease, poverty and death. Stark and Bainbridge (1985) argue that the most effective religious compensators are those that address the specific deprivations of adherents, and this promise fits that description closely. A focus group of adult men linked the promise to present hardship:

> We have been promised of a better life on top of the water. A safe place on top of the waters free from worldly challenges. Our god lives on top of water and will take us with him when he returns and his return becomes nearer when people are faced with more calamities (FGD2-AM-05, September 2024, Chemororoch Village).

The final clause, "his return becomes nearer when people are faced with more calamities," recurs across several interviews and is central to the movement's eschatological reasoning. Present suffering is not evidence that Jehovah has abandoned his people; it is evidence that his return is approaching. Weber (1978) noted that eschatological hope in a future reversal of fortunes is among the most widespread theodicies of the disprivileged. The LIRM version gives that hope a precise location and makes every new calamity a measure of its nearness.

5.7 Separation and mutual obligation

The movement's beliefs also shape its social ethics. Separation from "people of the world," grounded in the purity concerns discussed above, produces a sharp division between the chosen Israelites and outsiders. This outward separation has an inward counterpart. Because adherents are discouraged from relying on outside religious networks and, as the accounts of illness show, on state health services, the community depends heavily on its own resources, and the sharing of food, land and labour in times of need is treated as a religious duty. Wilson (1970) describes introversionist sects as withdrawing from the world to cultivate holiness within a separated community, and Wallis (1984) notes that world-rejecting movements must build comprehensive internal support structures to survive the isolation they impose on themselves. In the LIRM, conduct within the community's boundary is understood as confirmation of Israelite identity, so that mutual obligation is woven into the movement's eschatological self-understanding.

6. DISCUSSION: AN INTEGRATED THEODICY

The findings reveal a belief system whose elements reinforce one another. Divine sovereignty grounds worship in a combination of fear and protection under Wanyonyi's power. Israelite election gives adherents an exclusive covenantal status that is performed through dress, posture and separation. The doctrine of transformation recasts mortality as promotion into an angelic hierarchy and is made visible in the refusal to mourn and the sitting coffin. The promise of life on top of the waters offers a concrete reversal of the deprivations of the present. Each belief is intelligible on its own; together they are considerably more powerful as a source of commitment than any one of them in isolation.

Read through Weber (1978), the system as a whole function as a theodicy. It answers the question of why the chosen suffer by making suffering itself a sign of election and of the nearness of deliverance. Poverty confirms that the community does not belong to "the world." Illness becomes an occasion for sacrifice and a marker of Jehovah's approaching return. Death becomes transformation and enlarges the angelic host. In Barkun's (1974) terms, the system has incorporated the principal sources of potential disconfirmation, suffering and death, as confirmations. This is the main reason it has proved resilient.

The same structure helps to explain the movement's survival after the loss of its founder, a question Weber posed for all charismatic movements. Many movements tied closely to a charismatic founder fragment or decline when he dies. The LIRM's eschatology, however, had already redefined death before Wanyonyi's own passing. Within a framework in which members are transformed rather than dying, and in which Jehovah lives "on top of the waters" and will return, the founder's absence since 2015 can be understood as continued presence in another register (Ominde, 2020). The doctrine of transformation thus served as a resource for managing the succession crisis, supporting the transfer of day-to-day authority to the chief priest and the earthly angel while preserving Wanyonyi's supreme divine status. This is a distinctive pathway of post-charismatic continuity that merits comparison with other African movements.

The interpretive phenomenological approach also brings forward the internal diversity that external accounts tend to flatten. Adherents are not uniformly certain; at least one office-holder openly described doubt while continuing to serve. Leaders are not simply defending a fixed doctrine but actively positioning their movement against publicly discredited ones such as Shakahola. These findings caution against both the ridicule of popular coverage and the language of brainwashing that often surrounds new religious movements in Kenyan public debate.

Understanding a belief system on its own terms does not, however, require silence about its consequences. Teachings that discourage biomedical treatment, interpret rising sickness as advantageous and forbid mourning have evident implications for the health and wellbeing of adherents, including children, and earlier reports have linked the movement's history to significant mortality from treatable illness. The value of an emic account here is practical as much as scholarly. Health workers, local administrators and faith-based organisations seeking to engage the community are more likely to succeed if they understand that illness is interpreted within an eschatological framework, that sacrifice is the community's chosen therapeutic idiom, and that leaders are concerned to distinguish their movement from harmful ones. Engagement that works through the movement's own leadership and categories is more likely to protect vulnerable members than approaches that dismiss or ridicule its beliefs.

The study has limitations. It is a single-case study of one enclave, and its findings may not extend to LIRM adherents elsewhere. Access was negotiated through leaders, who may have shaped which members participated and how doctrine was presented to an outsider. The first author's position as a Christian outsider, though monitored reflexively, may also have influenced what participants chose to share. Future research could follow adherents who have left the movement, examine the experiences of children and youth more closely, and compare the LIRM's post-founder trajectory with that of other Western Kenyan movements.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has offered the first systematic account of the religious beliefs and eschatological thought of the Lost Israelites Religious Movement from the perspective of its adherents. It has shown that beliefs which appear bizarre when isolated, such as a god with metallic arms, sitting coffins and an afterlife on top of the waters, form a coherent and mutually reinforcing system when understood from within. At the centre of that system lies a theodicy that converts marginalisation, illness and death into signs of election and of imminent deliverance. This theodicy sustains the commitment of a small and poor community and has allowed it to absorb the loss of its founder by redefining death itself. The case adds to the study of African Israelite movements a distinctive configuration in which the founder is God rather than prophet and death is promotion rather than ending. It also demonstrates the value of Cox's interpretive phenomenological approach, combined with Weber's attention to theodicy and charisma, for understanding new religious movements that public discourse too readily dismisses.

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Ethics Statement

The study received ethical clearance from the Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology Ethics Review Committee and a research licence from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). All participants gave informed consent, and identities have been protected through alphanumeric codes.

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