4

The Nomiya Luo Church: A Gender Analysis of the Dynamics of an African Independent Church Among the Luo of Siaya District

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Introduction

The study of independent churches in Africa is a growing and crowded field. Publications have increased exponentially during the last three decades while mastery of the literature is beyond the grasp of a single scholar (Turner 1977). Independent churches appear in fascinating variety. Therefore, the term is just a working definition and a recent terminology applied to break-away Christian churches which were identified in older studies as syncretistic, nativistic, separatist, sectarian, messianic, Zionism, prophetic and cultic. In Africa the increase of such religious breakaways has been immense (Turner 1971; Lantenari 1963; Barret 1968).

Earlier, these churches were seen as a reaction to colonialism but when they continued to mushroom into modern times, society began to reconsider the causes. Today, there are about 9,000 African Independent Churches (AICs) with millions of followers estimated at 15 per cent of Africa's total Christian population. According to some sources these estimates are too conservative since the movements are growing faster than scholars are studying them.

Independent African Churches emerged at a remarkably earlier date in Kenya. Even before the First World War there was articulate independency. The independent African Church Movement in Kenya, however, grew in

response to colonial presence and became a vital part of the political history of the country. It became especially important at a time when there were few other expressions of African response to colonial presence. Consequently, independency in church has gained increasing significance by virtue of its scale (Barret 1978). After independence, by 1966, Barret (1968:30) identified 166 independent churches in Kenya. By 1978 they had become a matter of state concern.

These movements have both reshaped and rocked the stability of the mainline churches. Their aim has been to rectify the Christianity of the mainline churches by injecting the dynamic aspects of the traditional religion, the social mannerisms and world-view as well as the practical aspects of the gospels into their religious movements. Consequently, they brought about a new conception of the cure of souls and an African theology with a new appreciation of the African personality and its cultural and religious customs (Barret 1970:153). They rejected the paternalism shown in areas such as sharing, simplicity and compassion. They also rejected the monopolistic attitude of the mainline churches. Instead, they aimed to create a fraternal spiritual understanding geared towards arousing a sense of identity amongst the followers while fulfilling immediate needs of the communities (Baeta 1962:6; Sundkler 1963:31).

The rapid increase in the number of independent churches in Kenya has generate significant attention and scholarship documenting their rise and spread (Muga 1978; Wipper 1977; Jassy 1973; Opwapo 1981; Hinga 1980; Welbourn and Ogot 1966; Ogot 1973; Welbourn 1961; Muga 1975). Some scholars have also explored various other issues pertaining to independent churches, such as their theological stances. However, most of the independent movements in Kenya have been described, at least in the colonial period, from the viewpoints of westerners. Sex, superstition, magic, witchcraft were therefore fore-grounded by journalists and novelists in their discussion of independent churches. The government and the missionary churches reinforced this picture and some scholars also supported the colonial view (Ogot 1963:249-73 and Lonsdale 1964:363).

Currently, there are various sympathetic approaches to the study of independent churches. These make important, sometimes contradictory, contributions to the understanding of religion and change in Kenya. For example, because independency involved direct break from mission control, one might expect that they too would emphasise influential roles for women in reaction to the limited roles held by lay African women in mission organisations. Additionally, women predominate numerically in the churches and have played a great part directly or indirectly in the troubled life of the church. However, these studies do not analyse the participation of women in these churches and their role in the process of social transformation. In fact, with the exception of research done on women's participation in the Legio

Maria church, there is little information on how gender shapes religious ideology or the experience of conversion in studies of the Kenyan independent churches.

Theoretical Focus

In her 1995 book, Kretzshmar questions the necessity of churches and missionologists giving serious consideration to gender. She argues that while gender debate proceeds apace in academic circles, it is not taken seriously in the church. She concludes with the questions: 'Can we afford to ignore the vital issues of gender?' Kretzashmar's questions are relevant here because we need to ask how those who are proclaiming the good news, respond to the oppression or subordination of women. Can the church preach liberation if it oppresses women within its own ranks? What is the reason for the subdued silence of women in church and other areas? What does this convey of the church and its perception of women. This comment is carried further by the remark made by Ramodibe (1996):

> There can be no argument that the church is one of the most oppressive structures in society today, especially in regard to the oppression of women. About three-quarters of the people in the church are women, but men make decisions affecting them alone (with very few exceptions). Once women are acknowledged as pastors, as the body of Christ, we can build a new church (in Africa). I say a new church because the church as we have it today is a creation of male persons. As women, we have always felt like strangers in this male church

The term 'gender' is used here simply to denote the distinctions of male and female. As such it is closely related to the term 'sexuality' as opposed to the narrower term 'sex'. Whilst the latter is generally used in relation to sexual intercourse, the former refers to our human identity and ways of relating to the world around us. Gender represents that which constitutes femaleness and maleness and the social constructs and expectations that influence how gender identity and differences are perceived.

Although these definitions appear to state the obvious, when examined more closely, a host of difficulties arise that I will not delve into. We will just focus here on how women experience oppression, and how they are oppressed. Oppression simply means the imposition of the will of a certain person or group on another person or group. It may be structural (repressive cultural customs) or more personalised. It can be expressed externally and internalised by the oppressed. Externalised oppression is manifested through androcentrism, exclusion and subjection.

Androcentrism is the habit of thinking about the world from a male perspective. It drowns or silences women's voices and perceptions by the continual outpouring of male perceptions into the world (Wehr 1987:16). Androcentrism, then, is a male-centred worldview, which devalues or excludes

female perceptions, critique and contributions. It is also seen in instances where women are not permitted to define themselves or their roles but simply discover that they have been defined and categorised by the others. So they become the silent other. Women are then perceived as non-men, those who have neither the status nor the roles of men. Very often women are defined in terms of their relationships with other people.

Another way of oppressing women is through exclusion, or restriction to certain areas and from certain responsibilities, for instance church government. Women are mainly prevented from occupying positions of leadership, power and authority or from participating in significant ecclesiastical roles in churches. This means that men control the decision-making sectors. Consequently, women can attend church services, raise money and teach children, but they cannot be ordained or serve in positions of leadership. The third form of oppression is by subjection, which also has cultural forms. Clearly then, oppression has very concrete and damaging forms. These forms of oppression have one thing in common: men in various categories of life impose them. Hence, all forms of oppression can be encompassed under the rubric of patriarchy, literally the rule of fathers or men for the benefit of men.

Internalised oppression is insidious, especially for women. In religion and other areas, it makes women become compliant victims. Such women are difficult to liberate. They have accepted the order and systems of the powerful and therefore need to be convinced about the necessity of liberation. Internalised oppression becomes something of a vicious circle because once women accept the judgements of androcentrism or patriarchy, they are unable to critique it.

The question then is: why the oppression of women? The major reason, I would say is patriarchy. Although the precise origins of patriarchy may be difficult to establish, its presence is notable in the persistent male domination current in all spheres of life. In a dominant patriarchal society, women and men are considered unequal in an oppressive world-view perpetuated in fact by both men and women. In the independent churches this has remained as the norm.

This paper explores the connections between gender and independent Christian ideology in the formation of new social relations and affirmation of traditional relations of dominance between men and women. Women's roles in these movements are examined. A case study of the Nomiya Luo Church is used to aid in the analysis of these issues. This paper therefore discusses the history and tenets of the Nomiya Luo Church, which emerged in colonial times and persists in independent Kenya. Being developed among a group of people with a semi-patriarchal set up, it provides a forum for analysing male dominance and its persistence in the society, including the church. The religious doctrines, beliefs and value systems that denigrate women, the unconscious fears of the men and how they affect the roles and values concerning women,

are also considered. The ways these systems have exerted controls on women are also discussed. Roles of women in independent churches, the opportunities for leadership, their roles as healers and patients in relation to their background and daily life concerns are discussed. The hidden sub-cultures and practices of women, which influence the groups are also examined in order to establish the nature of gender roles and attitudes in this church.

The Luo Background of the Nomiya Luo Church (NLC)

The NLC developed among an ethnic group of Nilotic origin, the Luo of Kenya, who were settling in their present localities in the 17th and 18th centuries. By 1900 the Luo settlements was complete and their politico-religious and socio-economic systems were intact. *Dala* (homestead) was the basic unit of society politically, socially, and economically. Thus the structure of the Luo society was dictated by the grouping of a man, his wife/wives and children as well as the type of economic production utilised by the household (Schiller 1982:67). The owner of the homestead was the primary authority in his compound.

In a polygamous homestead, the husband was the head of many households. Co-wives lived in separate houses (Ocholla-Ayayo 1980:34). Each co-wife was, therefore, *wuon ot*, that is, the head of the house and the leader of its domestic and economic activities. Under her were her children who grew up with the idea of *odwa* (our household) thus planting the concept of collective ownership. In the struggle for the recognition and independence of *odwa*, children of one household became antagonists of those of another household. Wives also became rivals in the possession of property and competition for the household favour (Ogutu 1975:19). Thus rivalry (*nyiego*) was practised as a means of promoting self-pride and unity. (Ochieng 1974:29). Sometimes favourable circumstances could lead co-wives to co-operate.

Each household (*ot*) was charged with all the activities required for the maintenance and needs of its members, including production, deployment and use of labour power as well as the determination of economic objectives. Land was allocated to the household. The land of one's mother (*puoth min*) was shared by the sons as they married or rather when the wedding was considered finalised (*riso*). A mother usually gave her son a part of her farms and his wife retained usufructory rights. It would henceforth be referred to as *puoth nyar kumanyio*, literally, the farm of the women from the foreign village, and this became the inalienable property of her sons. If a woman, however, deserted before bearing a male child, the farms reverted to her husband (Wilson 1965:12). If she had a male child before desertion, her farms became his future inheritance no matter how long he remained with his mother elsewhere.

Spiritual and political leadership went together and there were two ways of gaining this. The first was a man's lineage position that had significance in the matter of ritual. There was also charisma, which was individualistic in lineage structure. Apart from its influence on leadership, religion played a very significant part in the day-to-day life of the Luo and was generally practical at the family level. The Luo recognised the ancestral spirits and the supreme God and they also contended that each individual had his or her God (*Nyasache ni kode* – when one escaped from danger) who, in collaboration with the ancestors, was responsible for his or her wellbeing (Odaga 1980:23). They also believed that man was moulded in the womb of the mother. The uterus that was considered the point where life began was called *Nyasach dhako* meaning the uterus. It was here that God's moulding work was carried on. Reference to the uterus meant that a woman's social strength and power rested in her ability to give birth, preferably to sons, to continue the lineage of her husband. When a woman gave birth, there was rejoicing and people made reference to the fact that God had helped her. If she got a boy, it was said that she had brought forth the handle of the spear (*bol*) in reference to future male responsibilities. If she brought forth a girl, then she had produced the wild cat (*Ogwang'*), a symbol of unknown abode. The Luo also believed in spirits of non-human origin, magic and witchcraft.

In all matters of protocol, the senior wife (mikayi) was very important. Often she participated in the settlement of homestead land disputes. She always began the clearing of fields planting, weeding and harvesting before anyone else. Failure to wait for the chief wife to act first was bad omen and a breach of village discipline. However, every Luo wife basically controlled the crops grown on her land, which was used to feed the family or, if need be, for exchange. She was responsible for all labour provisions on the farm and processed the crops afterwards. According to a Luo myth, women infuriated God by disobedience, marking the beginning of hard labour for the women. Since the women caused the problem, her toil was greater, as evidenced by the division of labour leaving a lot of continuous agricultural labour to the women. Indeed, a young woman only received a recommendation as marriageable if she showed powers in the fields.

Within a typical homestead, division of labour was based on sex and age. Women and men had different roles (though overlap occurred in certain instances), as did the young and the old. Males were heads of homesteads and sometimes households, depending on the number of wives and family size. In decision making some men exerted control over many aspects of household operations while others tended to delegate authority to wives and sons. In homesteads with fewer people, the heads would be involved in many aspects of household operations. In larger homesteads, delegation was

easy. No matter how involved the men were in household operations women were in control of the domestic economy. (Oswald 1915:27-28).

While women were not expected to express their views publicly on important matters, they were consulted privately. Before a man took a decision with repercussions on the family he might say '*We apenj orindi mondi* (Let me consult the head rest before making the decision). This headrest was a woman, frequently the first wife (*mikayi*) (Odaga 1980:22). Men consulted particularly with *mikayi* because of her prominence in performance of all crucial rituals. She was considered the co-owner of the homestead with the husband. On attainment of menopause, all sexual relations with the husband ceased but she participated in decision-making. Older women were regularly consulted on numerous issues of significance.

The contribution of women to societal development was always recognised despite the fact that women were viewed as dependants. They were considered the weaker sex needing protection of the men in the homesteads. Nevertheless, in spite of these allowances to women, the Luo system was patriarchal and theoretically the men were expected to dominate. This was a system that could be easily manipulated by a more dominant system. Colonialism, which was a male dominated system, generated the alienation of women through practices like the monetisation of a variety of Luo practices. Several colonial economic, social and political policies were to have adverse effects on the Luo family life and specifically on the women.

The Founding of The Nomiya Luo Church

Yohana Owalo, the founder of the NLC, was a man with great experience within this new colonial worldview. He got involved with the colonial government possibly as a porter when the railway construction was approaching Kisumu before 1900. He became a migrant labourer in Kisumu and then proceeded to Mombasa to work for a court judge, Alexander Morrison. While in Mombasa, he had several visions and revelations that convinced him of God's call upon his life.

The most spectacular one that completely transformed him came in March 1, 1907 when he was taken to the first, second and third heaven by the spirit. He saw various revelations in these heavens. He noted that the first heaven, the abode of men was a remarkable place. All races of the world were attracted to it but the angels Raphael and Gabriel secured the gates. They allowed in the Arabs, the Jews and the Luo only because they had prophetic representatives. However, attempts by the Europeans (the Pope inclusive), the Goans and the Indian Bunyans were thwarted violently. They failed to meet the prerequisites. The second heaven housed numerous angels. In the third heaven he met the Godhead. God the father instructed Owalo to acknowledge that He was the only true God and beside Him there was no

other: Nor shall there be any after me. But currently the creation has deviated into the worship of images. Go! Take a well-sharpened knife to circumcise all men. He who has an ear let him hear and adhere but leave the disobedient alone. (NLC Prayer Book 1973:118).

Owalo was instructed to discard all human efforts to reach God (for example, Holy Mass). He was provided with a long cord whose other end was held by Jesus in heaven, to take to the earth. Jesus himself confirmed to Owalo that he was not of the same substance as God and so Owalo was to serve God alone. He was further instructed to take a long sharp sword and circumcise his adherents as a sign of distinction between his adherents and other Luo.

After his heavenly experience, Owalo was deterred by Morrison from starting his movement until he had acquired adequate education. Consequently he joined Catholic Ojola mission until it became apparent that his beliefs were inimical to the Catholic faith and he was sent away in 1907. He had a brief spate with the Muslims in Kisumu and was probably circumcised before he joined the CMS School in Nairobi in 1908. Later, he joined the Church of Scotland in Kikuyu by 1909. (Judicial 1/297 and Judicial 1/474, KNA). In October 1910, he joined Maseno as a teacher. Here, his controversial beliefs – that Jesus was not of the same substance as God and his rejection of monogamy an unbiblical European idea – became known and he was expelled in 1912. He left Maseno to start his Mission to the Luo later (1914) renamed Nomiya Luo Mission. This was the first African Independent Church in Kenya (For details on the life of Owalo, see Opwapo, 1981).

The thesis that these churches arose in reaction to colonial oppression does not adequately account for their emergence and proliferation (Lantenari 1963). Certainly the link between colonial oppression and initial religious reactions is clear and has been proven by scholars (Blandier 1971:417-487; Lantenari 1963:19-62). Yet, the situation is more complex, incorporating problems handled by religious and secular authorities within a given group and their susceptibility to, and contacts with, external groups.

J.M. Lonsdale (1964: 350) gives four factors in Nyanza environment that determined the character of the movements. The first related to the religious tug of war that existed in Nyanza. The European Missionaries appeared to be an auxiliary arm of the colonial government since there was mutual understanding between the missionaries and the government. This made the Africans conclude that, although their methods were different, government and missionaries had similar objectives. The second factor that determined the nature of the movements was the more immediate frictions of foreign rule, such as taxation, which forced people to go out far from home to labour. Third, the multiplicity of missions brought confusion to the people. Moreover, in Nyanza, independence was not purely an African phenomenon.

Willis Hotchkiss of the Friends African Industrial Mission decided to pull out of the mission and establish an independent mission in Lumbwa. Multiplicity of missions was an invitation to the indigenous religious heritage, which was interfered with, to react. It created a very suitable background or setting for these independent churches (Lonsdale 1964:350). This background was perhaps the basis for the emergence of the NLC.

A lot of literature on Yohana Owalo, shows political causes as basic to the emergence of the NLC. Lonsdale (1964) and Wipper (1977) suggest that Owalo utilised the movement as a vehicle for inter-clan rivalry, since he belonged to the clan traditionally opposed to the chiefly clan (Lonsdale 1964:208; Wipper 1975:157). Oginga Odinga says that the movement was a political protest because when Owalo was questioned by the District Commissioner in a public baraza, he said, 'Leave me to preach. I am preaching to Africans not whites' (Odinga 1968:6869). Ogot describes Owalo as the first Christian rebel in Nyanza, who, on discovering the hypocrisy of 'Westernism' decided to be a Christian but on his own terms (Ogot 1973:262).

In spite of these indicators, to conclude that political reasons generated this movement seems simplistic. A new religious movement does not necessarily become a political outlet. Its presence therefore, does not in itself signify the frustration of other expressions of power. In Owalo's call, the only indication of rebellion was his vision that Europeans, Indian-Bunyans and goans were denied entry into heaven. This could be explained as follows: Due to his inability to express his dissent, Owalo was content, for the moment with the notion that, in the realm of the spirit, colonialists and missionaries would miss out while the Luo, Arabs, and Jews will enjoy the splendours of heaven. Of course political factors were latent. Possibly he sought a movement to release the Luo, politically, socially, religiously, economically, and culturally, from colonial domination but realised that, given strong political overtones, his movement would experience severe reprimands from the colonial government which already responded violently to such movements.

Such responses were already noted in how the government dealt with the cult of Mumbo in South Nyanza between 1913-1915 (Wipper 1975:32-40) and the Chilembwe uprising of 1915 in Malawi. Owalo had to prove that his movement was not dissident by reporting regularly to Kisumu for a period of two years, a probationary period slapped on him by the Provincial Commissioner, Mr. John Ainsworth, before the movement could be registered. When it was evident that it was 'not subversive to good order and morality', it was registered. At the same time, Owalo got a political appointment to serve as (DC CNI/5/2 1919-1923 KNA) the sub-headman for Kochieng' clan. A reconstruction of the history of this movement reveals that a religious movement goes through several phases as it emerges and that its relationship with a larger political context changes overtime.

Owalo had a poor family background and perhaps sought the economic prosperity that seemed obvious in the mainline churches. However, economic causalities may not be adequate as explanations for his church's emergence. In fact, his mission station at Oboch spent, rather than obtained, money for feeding the numerous adherents who had to reside with him for one reason or other. This particular station was actually established to provide ample fellowship time for the adherents as they prepared for missions while also serving as a haven for his adherents from the rampant conscriptions of Africans for the First World War. These adherents had to undertake farm work for subsistence and not mere economic gain. Hence, the appeal of a new movement can be approached but not completely explained in terms of economic variables or even ethnicity.

The NLC arose in the context of a strong Western power through the colonial government, Christian missions and white settlers whose influence on the political, religious, economic and social issues had strong repercussions on the lives of the people (migrant labour and taxation). These were accompanied by profound efforts by schools and missionaries to introduce Western religion and culture. Adoption of European customs seemed indispensable to a true understanding of Christianity. The two missionary groups that evangelised Nyanza were the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the Catholic Society of the Mill Hill Fathers (MHF).

European occupation resulted in political dependence and the Luo, who were accustomed to consensus policies, now had to obey orders. Economic pressures caused by taxes and other measures forced people to obtain cash, which was possible only through migrant labour. This had detrimental effects, particularly on the institution of the family. Although the Luo were willing and even eager to derive benefits from the new conditions, education and Christianity were to disrupt traditional patterns as much as migrant labour did. Respect for taboos, structures and values on which the society depended for its security and harmony, was beginning to shake (Ndeda 1992). Solidarity of the clan and family was under constant attack. The stability of tribal marriage patterns, including polygamy, the levirate, divorce and dowry were beginning to disintegrate and yet there were no secure new alternatives. Since traditional leadership structures were no longer valid, disappointment and loss of identity seeped in, without a corresponding outlet for these emotional repercussions. Subsequent stress possibly led to tension and unhappiness, loss of identity and sense of belonging (Whisson 1964:63–163).

Yohana Owalo lived within this set-up but also had a wider experience due to his interaction with people from other parts of Kenya. He was also aware of their responses to colonialism. He, probably, longed for an African pattern of worship and a meaningful local community that formed a transition between the old and the new. As Erasto Muga writes, he might have desired

a church with a Luo hero, a saviour of the people. His attitude represented rejection of missionary paternalism and certain Western Christian values, such as monogamy, which were integrated in Christian teaching (Muga 1975:167).

Wilson (1970:231) claims that those who start their own religious movements are relatively deprived. However, separation sometimes comes from schism in existing sects not necessarily from external causes. Owalo's religious dissatisfaction can be inferred from his movement from one denomination to another and even from Christianity to Islam. Christianity as it was then preached did not seem suited to his needs and understanding. He needed an institution with equal recognition to Christianity and Islam and of superior quality to the Christianity introduced by Europeans. When he visited the heavens, God wanted to admit the Luo, like he had done to Arabs and Jews, but they had no prophet. Owalo was then given the Mission to make God's message relevant and usher the Luo, who accepted his message, into heaven. However, they also had to have a unique experience like that of Jews and Arabs, that of circumcision of the male adherents.

In Owalo's heavenly experience recorded above, there was evidence of theological issues that were basic to the rise of NLC. He refuted the reliability of the Catholic doctrine of purgatory since on his way to heaven he only saw hell, not purgatory. Consequently the NLC catechism clearly instructs against the belief in purgatory. On a man's death he is ushered into heaven or hell according to his deeds on earth (Ogut 1978:50, 53). Owalo was warned against these because they marred the image of God.

This experience touched very closely on the cardinal Catholic belief in the supremacy and infallibility of the Pope, and the intercession of the saints, particularly that of Mary. In fact, in the first heaven, the abode of men, he informed that the Pope was barred from heaven because of misleading the faithful to rely on relics and images in worship and to believe in the intercession of the saints. In the third heaven, another cardinal Catholic sacrament, the Holy Mass, was declared an unacceptable sacrifice before God and Owalo was instructed to teach his adherents that the only acceptable sacrifice was a broken and contrite heart. The Catholic practice of the sacrament of bread and wine, which they consider as the real or actual body and blood of Christ was declared sinful and Owalo was reprimanded for having tasted the components and hence the NLC catechism teaches vehemently against it.

All the churches he attended believed that Jesus Christ was not only a son of God but also of the same essence as God. However in the third heaven, Owalo was instructed that God alone was to be worshipped. The church hymnals stress the supremacy of God. In his Bible, he deleted sections that equated Jesus with God. In the many hymns borrowed from the Anglican Church, he replaced the word Jesus with Jehovah. For Owalo, Jesus was a perfect man endowed with power to perform miracles to furnish evidence

that God was and that he was God's messenger. Perhaps this is why Ogot (1973:256), Willis, and Whisson describe him as a 'Unitarian', while suggesting that the Unitarian Judge, Alexander Morrison, impacted on Owalo's faith (Whisson 1964:154). Since Owalo had an intimate relationship with Alexander Morrison, it is possible that apart from working together on the study of Luo grammar, they had serious theological discussions (Opwapo 1981:18).

However, the two most immediate antecedents to the founding of the church were firstly, that he was called by God in March 1907, and secondly, his expulsion from the council in Maseno which forced him to start his own Mission. Additionally, with a rapidly changing society created in part by Christianity, certain important factors were overlooked. First, spiritual, emotional, moral and religious needs of the Luo were ignored. Visions, dreams, spirits and even their idea of God were considered futile. The society needed solutions to existential problems such as fears of the forces of evil as well as emotional outlets and religious healing. Owalo's teaching emphasised the spiritual world, especially angels that, for him, comfortably replaced the Luo spirits. Second, whereas the healing world was ignored and rejected as futile, however, Owalo prayed for the sick and exorcised the possessed. Third, while polygamy and the levirate were castrated, Owalo accepted these as practical within his movement.

It is also probable that the local people did not comprehend several aspects of Christian teaching but lacked the courage and forum to declare it or to formulate something more suitable. This was a part play by Owalo. With the magnitude of his experience and as a courageous person, he noted a problem and sought a solution. He engaged in a most serious search for a more acceptable reality. When he had established what seemed relevant to a people who had to adjust to change, he started propagating it in 1912. He was mainly concerned with his tribe, the Luo, and this concern has continued to affect the development of the church membership.

In conclusion, it could be said that Owalo seemed to be an original and imaginative thinker, despite his limited education. He also had the charisma of leadership, which made it possible for him to have followers. Secondly, Owalo's movement had both religious and political components, but the political aspect was disguised in his theology. His was an attempt by a person in a rapidly changing society to create a kind of dialogue between Luo traditional beliefs, Islam and Christianity as he looked for meaningful experiences in different traditions. He used the idea of the centrality of God in the three traditions and related every other idea to it.

The African NLC did not advance through organised evangelism. The church developed through contact by migration, which continues to date, or through the initiatives of local adherents. A new community formed around the first converts, since among the Luo, a man of plenty draws people to

himself. Other groups were formed as disciples multiplied and spread out from the initial centre. The best illustration would be that of Tanzania's North Mara. The NLC was introduced in North Mara in 1929 by Nickodemu Siwa, who reached there accidentally while searching for pasture. He settled at Ochuna where he formed the first community. With the development of the movement in the area, he became the Bishop and then, relinquishing daily affairs to his assistant, he settled in another area of the district when the pasture was exhausted. After settling down in North Mara he then invited other members from Kenya to go and baptize. This sort of growth ran a risk of slackening off as the initial dynamism of the movement gave way to routine.

Soon after the death of the founder, the evangelical impetus diminished. After 1920, there were adherents in North Mara District of Tanzania, Gem Ahono and Alego and continued expanding until early 1930s. A government report in 1933 said, 'Nomiya Luo Mission (African) continues to gain ground and is spreading its activities in South Kavirondo and among the Luo settled areas' (DC/CN1/6/2, 1932–34:KNA). However, soon after 1934, the government report said that, 'The Nomiya Luo Church continues to function but I have not heard it spreading' (DC/CN1/6/2, 1932–27:KNA). Whereas its expansion could have been curbed by the pattern it took, the most serious drawbacks were connected with internal feuds. The church experienced crisis at the death of the founder. Beginning from 1920, it survived sixteen and a half years of leadership crisis. Today, the church survives as Nomiya church with numerous splinters.

The Nature and Attractions of the Nomiya Luo Church

This religious movement of the Nomiya Luo Church was attractive to both men and women and spread with such marked rapidity that by the time of the death of the founder, it had spread all over Luoland and into some of the white settled areas. When the growth rate of a movement is so rapid, several issues need to be responded to, for instance, why were people joining? What features did it display that made it attractive?

First, when Owalo appeared in Asembo, it is possible that he recognised the situation of the Luo Community in the face of colonialism. He capitalised on this situation and then articulated it. He introduced a movement attuned to the traditional fears, needs and aspirations. Several cultural practices of the Luo disgusted the Europeans, especially missionaries, who militated against them. Indeed their attitude to the indigenous culture and religion was generally disastrous. To the missionaries the Luo practice of polygamy was offensive to Christian morals, therefore, the baptism of polygamous men and of women and children of such marriages, was not allowed. Owalo's movement contributed significantly to the process of de-culturation. His curtailed

campaigns against certain religious practices, customs and institutions, for example, polygamy.

The controversial issue of polygamy was touchy because it was an integral part of the local culture and people were bewildered with the idea that there should be anything wrong with it. The crusade against polygamy by Christianity directly affected all, particularly the women. Wives of polygamists suffered if their husbands became Christians because the man was only permitted to keep one wife and the others were often sent away suffering the stigma of rejection and disgrace. Robins (1979) suggests that women joined independent movements seeking religious legitimisation for the rejection of polygamous unions. Europeans attacked it as originating from sinful lust but failed to recognise it as an economic and social institution. Thus, the campaign against it was conducted with colonial criteria, methods, and aims, which took little account of the real and immediate exigencies of women.

For women, this constant conflict between mission and polygamous establishments was tantamount to an assault on the family. Luo women had managed to co-operate with co-wives. Polygamy worked for them since it guaranteed them some autonomy, personal freedom and greater mobility than would be possible in monogamous nuclear family. They could also use it as a means of maximising their own interests. Several wives in a homestead meant that women had more time to themselves and could develop strong bonds with other women. Although the practice of polygamy has declined, it persists to date and perhaps today the attitude of women towards it is completely different. However, from Owalo's time through to early post-independence days, at face value women felt quite comfortable.

Owalo authorised men to keep a maximum of four wives if they were interested in leadership positions, but gave no limitation to those with no leadership interests (Opwapo 1981). He, however, advocated for equal treatment for all wives by the husbands. He maintained that polygamy was not immoral but scriptural since patriarchs like David, Abraham, and Solomon practised it with no godly vindication. He insisted that polygamy was more acceptable than adultery. Thus entry into the church became easy; polygamists did not need to discard extra wives and the polygamous women and children were relieved of the stigma. They acquired recognition and acceptance, which they had been denied in the mainline churches. Owalo actually stopped Daudi Migot, his colleague in Maseno, from divorcing his second wife. Many adherents such as Samuel Otieno of Manyatta, Nickodemu Tambo of Nyakach, joined the movement because of its teaching on polygamy.

Yohana Owalo Christianised and incorporated customary marriage patterns into the religious and social life of the people. His acceptance of polygamy in particular endeared his movement to the people. He recognised the social significance of this type of marriage to the Luo people. Anyone intending to

marry was advised to negotiate with the girl's parents and fulfil the dowry according to the traditional requirements. When his effort to get such marriages officially registered by the colonial government in Kisumu failed in 1914, he instituted his own pattern of marriage arrangement that was in line with that of the community. Henceforth when dowry requirement was met, the faithful gathered in the groom's home and ceremonially went as a group to convey the bride from her natal home. The marriage was not consummated on the first night; the man spent the whole day and evening with Owalo in prayer (Opwapo 1981:159). Breach of this order was a serious offence.

Currently, everyone intending to marry notifies the church leader three months in advance to enable them to make public announcements of this intention at both the man and the woman's local churches. After this, the bride and groom would register at the judiciary before the church ceremony and other celebrations. Intention of marriage to a junior wife would still be announced in the churches. After dowry is fully paid, the faithful will gather at the man's home for celebrations and prayers to welcome the woman. However, life is dynamic and changes have occurred to the extent that adherents intending to take junior wives do so secretly because women's attitude towards polygamy has changed over time.

Despite the strategic advantages of the church's acceptance of polygamy, we still recognise that in some African Independent Churches, other issues and situations waging direct and significant assaults on the family have emerged. Some of the movements have been established by women, who have abandoned marriage and all sexual relations in order to be free to preach, for example, Gaudencia Aoko of Legion Maria who left her marital home after the death of her two children. In Ivory Coast, the Deima cult was established in 1942 by Maria Lalu, a married women who took a vow of chastity. The same could be said of Mai Chaza and Alice Lenshina in Zambia. The majority of these leaders relate strange tales, for example of death that leads to going to heaven and being entrusted with a ministry which they can only fulfil effectively without marriage.

Yet, for NLC adherents, marriage is important. The practice the levirate, whereby on a man's death his widow was inherited by his brother in order to raise children to carry on the line, was abhorred by the Europeans. In the view of the missionaries, the practice posed a serious threat to a widow's ability to remain steadfast in her loyalty to the church. In the early years of the British administration, the Christian widows were protected by the marriage ordinance of 1912, the missions and the government wanted to confront this issue but no satisfactory solution was reached (Spencer 1973:108). According to the Luo, the practice of the levirate ensured that the widows and their children had their rights to a secure home. Owalo advocated for the retention of a reformed levirate. By this practice wives were not inherited at their

husbands death. They were regarded as still formally married to the dead men and referred to as chi liel (wife of the grave). The leviratic union was not regarded as marriage, although some of the elements are common. This was like the Luo version of the life insurance policy and women had a choice in who to be their levir. The leviratic union finds a close parallel in the Old Testament. It was on this type of marriage that Israelites based their approach to polygamy. The widow was cared for in some ways by this arrangement. To date, it is the practice of NLC to ensure that widows are inherited and they claim a biblical basis for it. (Genesis 38; Deuteronomy 25:5–10; Ruth 4).

Handling of the dead and deceased is a big score to the church because the Luo celebrate death. When an adherent died, they actively participated in the celebrations, ceremonies and burial. Seventy (70) days after the burial a ceremony to free the dead to proceed to heaven was conducted by the faithful. The NLC members believe that after death the spirit of the dead continues to hover in the air space watching the handling of his affairs. After seventy days, all that pertains to burial should have been appropriately handled to release the spirit to rest in peace. Henceforth if the dead was a man then his wife/wives was/were free to pick a levir.

Owalo therefore built a community out of the breaking pieces of the old and the ill adopted offerings of the new. He understood the importance of witchcraft and ancestral spirits among the Luo and viewed them as issues to be dealt with through the ministry of the church. Consequently, he promised both mental and physical healing of illnesses. Adherents cite several instances of healing and exorcism. The majority of the exorcised were women and exorcism remains a common practice in the NLC. The tolerance shown towards polygamy, the levirate and other traditional patterns was compensated for by the rigorous and legalistic taboos on drinking, smoking, dancing and wearing of shoes in holy places. Traditional religious concepts and practices were re-interpreted in a Christian sense. This kind of re-interpretation seemed acceptable within the changing circumstances.

This movement also met a need in a society disturbed by the colonial impacts. Specifically, the Luo could neither provide from their resources nor accept without disruption the Europeans life style. Europeans paid little attention to cultural beliefs and practices of the Luo. This was despite warnings by Provincial Commissioner John Ainsworth asking: '[a]ll persons who have dealings with the natives of this country to investigate their customs and beliefs before attempting to govern them, to proselyte them, to trade with them, or to live amongst them and employ them as labourers, for it is only by understanding and appreciating their superstitions and habits that one can hope to win their sympathy and affection' (PC NZA 2/3. 1908-15, KNA).

After disrupting this kind of community, the Europeans failed to offer any alternative community to replace the lost solidarity of the society. By

introducing the new movement Owalo was providing a home, a community, for those experiencing the disruption. The First World War enhanced their disruption of the traditional patterns even further and therefore those who joined the NLC found it accommodative.

Thirdly, Owalo's personality also played a significant part in the formation, development and the nature of the message of the church. The movement was a product of a revelation received by him directly by divine will. His doctrine emanated from the heavens. Through the account given of the supernatural world, the character of the mission and the message can be perceived. The important element was the role of the prophet in relation to the movement he founded. He was chosen by God to be the interpreter of God's will for men and their guide on their way to salvation. Before the message was communicated to the rest of the humanity, the call of the prophet and the promise of salvation were first addressed to the Luo, the particular group of which he was a member. He was to be the intermediary between God and his people.

Through him, the group was to be made equal to other races, to ethnic and social groups dominant in the material world, and even better than some, like the Europeans, Goans, and the Indian Banyans, who were kicked out of heaven by the angels. His people became a chosen people, like Jews and Arabs, because, henceforth, they also possessed in him direct line with heaven. The prophet, therefore, was the incarnation of every desirable quality and, through him, the people participated in the revelation of which he was the instrument. Owalo's relationship to the people is therefore an essential part of his message.

Although the church is not clear whether Owalo was a messiah or a divine person, what mattered was the divine character of the message and the revelations that continued throughout his career as a prophet. In other words, a direct communication with God was the source of the movement's dynamism. Without it, the church would have diminished or simply stagnated. Owalo's charisma, which was associated closely with divine revelation, helped him claim and gain obedience and the respect of his fellows in the Luo community. The pattern of fasting, visions and returning with power is a feature of many stories of how a `Jabilo', (medicine men) among the Luo, gained his power. The charismatic person was usually the arbiter in society, he had the energy and personality to unite people and to turn the society in the direction of his ambition and to bring order where there were problems. The personality of Owalo, particularly after the heavenly experience, was such that it commanded obedience and respect, especially when he could be considered a charismatic person. His charisma was recognised by friends, and foes and adherents. A charismatic person usually appeared in the hour of need, so Owalo showed a masterly judgement in the selection of his moment.

The NLC was an African movement, not only in its leadership and the growing membership, but also in its attempt to come to terms with the African existential situation. This African-ness was at first a definite asset. Through it God's word was made to belong to the Luo, thus the Luo self-respect was regained. To date one of the articles of faith is that the NLC will provide eternal life for all its adherents. This movement also attracted almost everyone. Men who had nasty marital experiences with the colonial system joined with their whole families. Those most attracted to the movement were women. Studies on independency ascertain that women make up at least two thirds of the non-missionary church members and have often noted the greater attraction of religious faith and religious participation to women than to men. This is particularly true for the independent churches (Sundkler 1969; Seeley 1984).

Membership of the Independent Churches provided certain benefits. Women in particular gained a caring support network outside the formal structures (e.g. fellowship groups with shared experience) of society as well as opportunities for personal advancement. These churches also formed a legitimate space within which women freely participated outside the home without questions or need for justification. On the other hand, they provided that spiritual solace and community in a world in which hard work, social, economic, physical and emotional violence were the order of the day. Nervous breakdowns or mental disturbances are not rare among women with such stresses. In these small local communities, there was relief. Women found a relaxing escape from the arduous daily tasks and an opportunity of entering into a sympathetic relationship with women under similar strains. When the woman was prayed for or when she prayed alone, she underwent a psychological treatment that gave her emotional relief. Increasing drift of women into independent movements was also due to barrenness, delay in conception, and domestic difficulties. The churches responded to these problems through deliberate and open prayer and healing sessions. And as Barret (1968) claims, it is in the independent church movements of Africa that women had the chance to recover some of their traditional status and position, which had been undermined by the teaching of the Christian missionary churches.

Apart from the tensions and anxieties of the family, the women in colonial times were also the victims of the policies of the mission churches. Missionaries had often criticised and undermined the African forms of religious expression in which women had a part to play. Lehmann (1963) suggests that many women were attracted to the independent churches because they replaced the functions of customary institutions that were weakened by culture change. Barret remarks that the: 'missionary assault on the family complex caused women to act, for they felt the issues at stake more keenly than the men. With

more to lose, they vehemently defended their traditional institutions and way of life' (1968:147). It can thus be stated that the African independent churches gave women the opportunity to be involved in the churches' activities as participating actors not as silent observers.

Independence and the Subordination of the Luo Women

Ethnographic and historical studies of women and religion have thoroughly documented patterns of women's exclusion from positions of significant religious leadership. In many societies, women have active religious lives, yet ecclesiastical hierarchies rarely include women. In addition, official or great tradition religious concepts generally reflect men's and not women's priorities and life experiences. However, scattered throughout the world and centuries, there are instances of religious domination by women—in which women have been the leaders, the majority of participants and in which women's concerns have been central (Sered 1994:3).

In the available literature, the most puzzling issue is the immense power and influence which female leaders often wield in the independent churches as opposed to male dominance in the mainstream churches. In some of these churches, prophetesses have left indelible marks on the African continent, for example, Alice Lakwena of Uganda and Mother Jane Bloomer of Freetown. In Côte d'Ivoire, Marie Lalou was inspired by a dream to start a cult so women have ceremonial leadership and a clear sense of gender roles is maintained. In the movement of William Harries Wade women become leaders and gender roles are well balanced but polygamy is not renounced. Such independent churches believe that it is the Holy Spirit that raises people to positions of authority irrespective of gender. Locally, there is Mary Akatsa of Kawangware and Maria Aoko of Legio Maria who carved a niche for themselves in Kenya's religious history.

Bengt Sundkler (1976:79) says that from early times the church was like a women's movement. It functioned as a women's liberation movement long before that term was invented. Indeed, he points outnumerous examples of churches in South Africa where women excelled as leaders but he also gives instances of the efforts of women that have failed to be fully recognised and appreciated just because of gender. An example is that of Grace Tshabala who brought great revival in her church but was just described as 'after all she was merely a woman' (Sundkler 1976:79). Her husband and other Zionist leaders admitted, 'yes they can pray all night but of course man's prayer is stronger, for he is the head and leads in everything'. Perhaps in South Africa, the fact that women lead as presidents of churches, while others carry both the financial burdens and evangelistic outreach, Zionist's great contribution to African society. Zion gave women a central and honoured position, in healing activities, in worship and social life of the church, new emotional contacts of

care and concern were found where women and men could meet on equal terms. These terms were regarded as those of the ultimate authority, the Holy Spirit. But perhaps this was also determined by other parallel occurrences, for example, in 1955 women led in the bus strike in the Rand. There was also an upsurge in women's involvement in business and women's organisations were even stronger in the churches.

Some charismatic independent churches are more of a man's world than women. Many women scholars have criticised African Christian traditions for being sexist. Despite the church being populated by women, they still play a marginal role in power structures of the church. The African churches are like 'inverted pyramids' where the many women are led by the few men. One Kenyan Independent Church leader once commented that ordination of female priests was a deviation from Christian teachings and called for its immediate end. He claimed the practice would bring confusion. This was after the ordination ceremonies of a Presbyterian Church of East Africa and a Church of the Province of Kenya's female priests. The ceremony was attended by representatives from Akorino sect, Nomiya Luo Church, Salvation Army, Roho Israel and Nomiya Roho sect (KNA 18/1/1983).

Leadership is an important feature of any church. The hierarchy provides outlets for the exercise of leadership ability and at the same time ascribes status to the office bearers. It is also important to note that in various Christian denominations women have been striving to open up the churches' hierarchies to the participation of women and to increase women's representation in church and decision making bodies. Those who do not find immediate scope of advancement within the church are potential seceders unless new positions are created for them with new responsibilities. What we are saying is that women's roles in their religions vary tremendously between and within religions. Some religious organisations are founded on fundamentalist principles that promote a traditional or even regressive social position of women while others are welfare oriented. The NLC does not fall within the category of those that enhance the positions of women.

In some literature dealing with independent churches, the churches are seen as allowing outlets for expression of leadership qualities and disputes (West 1975:49, 74-75). The NLC developed its form of leadership with time. Owalo established what seems as a paramount chief type of leadership, in that the leadership went beyond clan boundaries. He mingled the Luo leadership pattern and the Christian one. The church was his ethnic group and he insisted that true Luo could only be his followers. Owalo was the first leader of the group. However, he failed to appoint his successor. He had no son to inherit leadership. Hence after his death wrangles over leadership ensued. However, Petro Ouma became recognised as leader.

In 1930 Petro introduced new positions in the leadership structure, that is, secretary, treasurer, and archdeacon. He held the position of Bishop in spite of the recurrent wrangles until his death in 1954. G.C. Owalo born to Alila wife of Yohana Owalo through leviratic union took over as Bishop. Writing the first constitution of the Church, G.C. Owalo included the following on leadership: 'The direct descendant (male) of the spiritual leadership will normally succeed to the spiritual leadership of the church at the maturity age of thirty or more years'. During his leadership, the area of jurisdiction was divided into two pastorates managed by two male pastors. Hence the leadership had two pastors, locational teachers, preachers and lay readers. Lay posts like the general secretary and treasurer were also introduced. All of the holders of these positions were men.

The Bishop was the overall head assisted by the archdeacon. The chief pastor, the direct representative of the Bishop, supervised locational priests and lay readers who were directly responsible for small communities. The secretary general was responsible for all church correspondences and the administration of the church. The treasurer was in charge of all church finances. This was the pattern of leadership until 1972 when the whole hierarchy was revised and made more elaborate. The new hierarchy included the synod as the supreme and final authority, chaired by the Archbishop. This synod met annually to deliberate on matters affecting the Church. The new offices introduced were the archbishop and the rural deans. One other important office that has caused numerous problems for the church is that of the *Sharriff* (The circumciser). There's the office of the chief sharriff, diocesan *sharriff* and the pastorate *sharriff*. However, those who claim to be able to circumcise are too numerous and several decrees have had to be promulgated to stop them from practising.

In the NLC, titles are important, as well as marriage and age in conferring status. The ideal leader must be male, at least be middle aged, and married. The leader must be literate but not necessarily have a high level of education. Ordination precedes the assumption of spiritual leadership position. This consecration must be done in the presence of many adherents. During the ordination of the leader, his duties are clearly delineated to avoid conflicts.

Based on the foregoing, it is evident that in the NLC, women have always been subordinate (Collins 1971; Caulfield 1981; Leacock 1981). Women's subordination occurs within the social process of their relationship with men and the way those relationships work to the detriment of women. Collins (1971) argues from the Freudian perspective that women's subordination is fundamentally as a result of men's sexual lust and their superior size and strength. Tiger, on the other hand, asserts that male dominance arises from their social bonding. The argument here is that the subordination of women in the NLC was not solely the result of the policies imposed by foreign capital and other forces of colonialism. Rather, patriarchal value systems in

both colonialism and the traditional African system reinforced and transformed one another evolving into new structures and forms of domination. Hence neither Owalo nor later church leaders seriously challenged the basic structure of gender relations and inequality between men and women remained rooted and perpetuated.

Therefore, independence lost its liberating function for women since it reinstates, determines and distorts traditional values. NLC mainly affirmed traditional relations of domination between men and women. Thus women were and continue to be actually victims of male dominance. Patriarchal value systems borrowed from both the Luo patterns and colonial system were supported by religious beliefs of the NLC and exerted social belief in male superiority and female inferiority. Hence subordination of women was rubber stamped by the NLC. Thus, despite the attractions of this movement, it was still guided by strong patriarchal tendencies that were real and quite durable. This system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women was clearly replicated in the Nomiya Luo Church, causing the subordination of women in the movement. The NLC developed fundamental organisational principles based on the traditional social structure with gender as the major determinant of the division of labour. As in the rest of the society, the major decision-makers and functionaries are men. The main figures in the church are the male bishops, elders, administrators and so on.

This religious movement was viewed as everyone's concern but with the specific responsibility and privilege of men. Women were extremely important, absolutely essential and highly regarded but primarily as facilitators of the men's religious activities. Most of the women were not aware of their own giftedness, dignity, potential and self worth because they were unconsciously victims of male domination, social prejudices and discrimination. Their valuable contribution to the church was either insignificantly appreciated or not at all. Women were not appointed into the critical areas of decision-making like the NLC synod and other gatherings of leaders. To date, the church structure has not allowed women entry into these roles. They have also been excluded from the leadership role in all public rituals, for example, no woman officiates as an elder during ordination and baptismal ceremonies and there is no female *sharriff* (or circumciser).

However, women played the same domestic roles that they fill in other areas of life such as cleaning the church, cooking and serving during their ceremonial functions. Women also lead in the church singing on Sundays and other occasions and organise prayers for the sick. They continue to be in charge of women's meetings and the cleanliness parades conducted during one of their annual celebrations. Perhaps, they also exercised considerable informal authority through their husbands or their fathers. Currently some

may preach during *mony* (all night vigils) which emerged after the demise of the founder.

Female religious participation, religious metaphors and beliefs concerning female sexuality are all evidences of the existing subordination. Female religious metaphors, for example, derived from their sexual and reproductive status. There is also the age held belief that female sexuality is polluting and contaminating to all things. Hence a woman would not lead worship service or the singing while menstruating. Her sexuality was also seen as needing periodical purification, for example, after birth of a child the woman was confined for a period of either thirty-three days or sixty-six days depending on the sex of the child. This period ended with a feast (*Sawo*) in which chicken and or other animals were slaughtered to mark the end of the period of confinement and her purification. During confinement, the woman was under the care of an elderly woman. She ate specially prepared food, was confined to specified section of the house, was not to be seen outside their house, was not to touch her husband, church clothes, bible and prayer book. Neither did she have sexual relations with her husband during this period. In other words she was in a state of sexual taboo. In fact, independent churches that involve women in ministry still evoke the inauspicious the energy that emanates from female sexuality, using it to curtail women's involvement e.g. a menstruating woman, or one who has just delivered, or unwashed after sexual intercourse or women with uncovered hair (Oduyoye 1992:20). Women are keen observers of these taboos against pollution particularly in the case of menses, which is believed to defile a woman and all that she touches.

Most ritual obligations for adult women were related to their roles as mothers and took place in the private family setting, or private domain of the household, for example, during the sawo (Celebrations after period of confinement). It is the women who directly helped their fellow women throughout the period of confinement. But at the end of the period, the church's male leaders officiated in the purification ceremony and ate the juicy sections of the meal as specified by the religious movement, for instance, the roasted chicken and the kidneys and livers of the animal. AS well, males perform rituals that are considered beneficial to the whole group, for example, baptism and circumcision.

Why are women subordinate? Paradoxically women attended and attend church in greater numbers than men. This largely concords with the commonly held view that women were intuitive, receptive to religious experience, and by nature, more devout than men. Yet women are often confined to the domestic sphere in some form of seclusion or constrained by numerous social conventions when they are allowed to move in public spaces. Secondarily, they are excluded from formal religion and from participating in important public rituals. They may be important in possession cults and healing rites but

these are extensions of traditional female roles. On the other hand the few men who attend the church hold prominent roles, perform religious rituals, formulate dogma, provide those divinely inspired ideas, control the powers of female reproductivity while dictating social and cultural roles for women.

Women have been also exploited by male adherents in these churches. In 1930, Elisha Ade, a recalcitrant member of NLC, took about 12 married women to Chula Ndere against the mandate of colonial government and the advice of NLC leadership, because he received a fresh vision from God. When they returned six months later, the majority of the women were not only pregnant but also sick. Similarly, in 1961, when James Owigo Pesa emerged among these NLCs with new powers of preaching, healing and exorcism, he took a group of women (married and unmarried) as helpers and doctors with him when he travelled from Oboch to South Nyanza. The end result was mass pregnancy. In 196, he had to quit and form his Holy Ghost Coptic Church, supported mostly by women who had received Muya (Holy Spirit-the ability to operate in the Spirit and perform miracles of all sorts.) The NLC and its splinters have somehow managed to control the churches' affairs in spite of the women who claim to have received the Holy Spirit.

Whereas women were freed from their political responsibilities they had expressive powers that operated chiefly in ceremonies and settings managed by female elders. Since they lacked legitimate authority women based their leadership upon two forms of power. One was the mystical power based upon spiritual gifts, which operated like *Muya* (Holy Spirit) and have been used since the 1960s. The other was through direct control of situated interaction. Like Jules Rosette (1979), we learn that this limited exercise of power was ceremonial leadership. The concept of Christian equality, with the expectation that men and women enter heaven side by side is basic to the NLC doctrine. However, the expression of equality in political leadership is denied women. Whenever men are present at a ritual, Luo women show the respect and express their viewsl through their formal leadership. Through this interaction, women can control and direct the sense of ceremonies and other ritualised behaviour without formally acknowledged leadership roles. This is evident in the participation in song (Opwapo 1981). The woman would be reprimanded when their participation transgressed the boundaries of sin, healing and medium-ship. However, during ritual the routine exercise of power occurs through song intervention. Intervention with song allows the woman to redirect sermon topics to present moral lessons that criticise the types of wrong doings they associate with men.

For men, preaching is a routine aspect of ritual leadership. The sermons are performed in concert with a reader who presents a passage, which is elaborated upon by a speaker in antiphonal fashion. Women remain seated and initiate songs from this position. The women's interruption is a controlled

contribution from this restrained position. This ritual participation could be viewed from the large Luo concept of wich kuot or shame. In the Sunday ceremony, the women's song participation is complementary to that of men. In the healing ceremony, women play an active and instrumental role. Healing would be like an extension of normal routine domestic activity. Midwifery (nyamrerwa) is confined to the older women.

Based on these, the words of E. Sullerot aptly forms a conclusion for this paper:

> A visitor from another planet would find it paradoxical that while the majority of the Churchgoers are women, religious doctrines certainly do not value the female sex very highly, or at least have been misinterpreted over the centuries to give women a subordinate role in religious practices. They have been debarred from conducting religious services and administering sacraments. In the main line churches currently a number of women are now rejecting the self-effacement involved in this definition of their religious roles (1971: 233).

The NLC has survived in a world that has experienced several changes. It is a world where both women are speaking with a new voice and a new urgency, in and out of the church. In conferences, seminars, and discussion groups - of various kinds - the issue of women's roles is addressed. It is amazing that in spite of political independence, the Women's Decade of 1975-1985, post-Nairobi and now Beijing, this church has, despite these changed circumstances, not considered ordaining women as priests or changing the rules concerning women's participation.

As life transmitters, effective agents of communication and fervent religious adherents, women in the NLC should be empowered to advance to all positions of church leadership. Empowerment would also mean providing education for the majority of the women who are either illiterate or semiliterate and are therefore incapable of participating in certain deliberations requiring literacy. Yet, they are the part of the church population that has distinguished itself for its love of the church, willingness to commit itself to work in the church. These women are actually the pillars of the church, always active, strong and ready to carry forth the mission of the church. With these in mind it is also necessary for the church to authenticate the ministry of women. Women must be given roles in decision-making in the walk towards equity. The church should also come to grips with its own concept of vocation and perhaps develop a new theology of family life.

Conclusion

What is the future of this religious movement? Would it fall prey to the secularisation process? Sociologists predicted that by the year 2000 religion would be much less relevant than it was in 1970. However, in 1990, a sociological census emerged suggesting that the secularisation idea was wrong

and a parochial European error made using the public choice theory. In fact, the census found that religion was more prevalent in 2000 than it was in 1970. The number of those calling themselves religious is on the rise in almost all countries of the world. Religion has become more prominent and widespread yet less relevant. There is no reason to imagine that this trend will be reversed within the next decades. Possibilities are that by 2010 religion will remain important in society even if the most crucial cultural and political decisions will not be made by it.

This means that NLC will survive in spite of the pejorative flavour it has maintained throughout time. This is especially because, as David Barret says, this movement's message shows God reflected in their own language and culture, making it easy for the marginalised to hear the word of God relevant to their own needs and expressed through their traditions. Thus, within these religious movements equality of the sexes in relationship to God will continue to co-exist with complete male monopolisation of leadership roles, religious laws and authority in community affairs since in religious frameworks that exclude women from authority, women may be active participants.

Women's religious lives are often closely linked to their interpersonal concerns. The network of relationships most relevant to the understanding of women's religiosity is the family. An intense concern with the well being of their extended family characterises the religious life of many women. Even within the male dominated religious contexts, women domesticate religion by emphasising ritual and symbols that give spiritual meaning to their everyday lives (e.g. Observing food taboos, sacramental foods). Studies of women and religion are notable for emphasising ritual instead of theology. Consequently we know more about what women do than what they believe in. Perhaps women invest more time into ritual than into theological speculations.

Nevertheless, for its own survival and future effectiveness, the NLCs needs to address the issue of the liberation of women. How can women be liberated from this? There is need for analysis of the individuals and the society. Both men and women need to develop a consciousness of gender related issues. Both long term and historical effects and present day realities need to be understood and evaluated, as far as this is possible. The issues causing oppression be dealt with. Finally there is need for increased education for women. Men also need to be liberated from the attitudes and structures that bind them. This implies that male and female liberation are two sides of the same coin; both are necessary for liberation and wholeness in the church.

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