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A GENDER ANALYSIS OF THE DYNAMIC OF AN AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCH

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Item Type	Article
Authors	Ndeda, Mildred A. J.
Publisher	EATWOT's International Theological Commission
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-11 13:40:47
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/189561

- 19 South Korean President Moohyun Roh 2003 October 31st officially apologized at a meeting in Cheju island for the misusing of power by the South Korean Government during the Cheju 4.3 Uprising from 1947 to 1954, which was a national incident under the name of anti-communism. It was one of the signs that the South Korean government reevaluates modern Korean history and apologized to the victims of this Cheju 4.3 incident officially.
- 20 The Issue of denuclearization of North Korea should accompany a call for the denuclearization of all nations including the U.S.
- 21 Under this unjust military system many Koreans and the environment of nature suffered. Particularly prostitute women on U.S. military base were frequently victim. There are many prostitute women, who were killed by U.S. soldiers. Due to SOFA they weren't punished by Korean law even though all murder cases were so brutal.
After two middle school students were killed by U.S. tanks in 2002, ordinary people became more aware of the problem of the U.S. military system in Korea including the environmental issue because of military drills. It was a pivotal incident.
- 22 Cf. John L. McCullough, "Compassion and Ethics: Korea and the Paradigm for Reconciliation", Lowell Lecture at Boston University Dec. 3. 2003.

**A GENDER ANALYSIS
OF THE DYNAMIC OF AN
AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCH:
NOMIYA LUO CHURCH IN KENYA
(C. 1907 to 1963)**

Mildred A. J. Ndeda

Abstract

This paper explores the connections between gender and the independency Christian ideology in the formation of new social relations as well as affirmation of traditional relations of domination between men and women. To aid in the analysis of these issues a case study is used, that of the Nomiya Luo Church in Kenya, whose history and tenets are discussed. This church developed within a semi patriarchal set up hence we analyse male dominance and its persistence in church. Some of the religious doctrines, beliefs and value systems and their impact on the roles and values concerning women are considered. Roles of women in independent churches, the opportunities for leadership, their roles as healers and patients and in relation to their background and concerns of

daily life are discussed. Moreover, as the rank and file members of such movements, women also possess their own hidden sub-cultures and practices, which definitely influence the groups. The intention is to establish the gender roles and attitudes in this church.

Introduction

The study of independent African churches is a growing field. Publications have increased during the last three decades (Turner 1977). They appear in fascinating variety. The term independent church is generic. It has been applied to churches which were identified in older studies as syncretistic, nativistic, separatist, sectarian, messianic, Zionist, prophetic and cultic. In Africa the increase of such religious groups has been immense (Barrett 1968; Lanternari 1963).

These churches were first seen as a reaction to colonialism; but when they continued to mushroom new explanations were sought. 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. As Hoehler-Fatton (1995:98) says:

The actual number of Africans involved in various kinds of indigenous Christianity may be much higher still, for the figures published in large surveys frequently exclude small, local Christian groups that stand distinct from established religious denominations but are not officially listed or recognized by their respective governments.

Independent African Churches emerged remarkable early in Kenya and before the First World War there was articulate independency. They emerged in response to colonial presence and became a vital part of the political history of Kenya. They were important at a time when there were few other popular expressions of African antipathy to the colonial presence. They rejected paternalism and the monopolistic attitude of the mainline churches. Their aim was to create

a fraternal spiritual understanding as a means of arousing a sense of identity amongst the followers and fulfilling immediate needs of the communities (Baeta 1962:6). By 1966, there were 166 independent churches in Kenya and by 1978 they had become a matter of concern to the post-independent state (Barrett 1968: 30).

Studies on independency ascertain that women make up at least two thirds of the non-missionary church members and note the greater attraction of religious faith and religious participation of women than men. Nearly every major study has commented that women comprised a majority of the adherents of the churches they studied (Barrett 1968:148; Jules-Rosette 1979: 127; Sundkler 1961; Sundkler 1976: 79). These studies do not however, analyse their participation and role in the process of social transformation. Women have played significant roles, either directly or indirectly, in the troubled life of the church in recent years, especially in the independent churches. 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.

The predominance of women in these churches is significant and yet, with the exception of research done on women's participation in the Legio Maria and Ruwe Roho churches, there is little information about the way which gender shapes religious ideology in these studies.

Independence, Gender and Women's Roles

Kretzshmar (1991:106-119) asks why issues of gender is to be taken seriously by the churches and missiologists. She argues that while in the academic circles gender debate proceeds apace, in the church it is not taken seriously. She concludes, "Can we afford to ignore the vital issues of gender?" We need to ask how those who are proclaiming the good news, respond to the oppression or subordination of women. Further, 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? Ramodibe (1996: 413-416 cited in Ramodibe 2000: 255) carries this comment further:

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 acknowledge 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.

Gender simply refers to the qualitative and interdependent character of women and men in society. Gender relations are constituted in terms of the relations of power and dominance that structure the life of women and men. It therefore constitutes an aspect of the wider social division of labour and this, in turn, is rooted in the conditions of production and reproduction, and reinforced by the cultural, religious and ideological systems prevailing in society

These socially constituted relations between genders may be of opposition and conflicts, which take very different forms under very different circumstances. They often take the form of male dominance and female subordination (Whitehead 1978). The subject matter of analysis is then the various forms that subordination takes, for example women's exclusion from positions of responsibility. This means sharing in status because a great deal of decision-making and authority goes to men. A gender approach means analysing the forms and the links that gender relations take, and the links between them and other wider relations in society. Religious relations are gendered, making it significant in religion. It organises material and ideal religious life. Throughout time it has functioned as a unique and critical symbol that in itself qualified (or disqualified) a person for participation. Sexual dominance prevailed and men were privileged over women. Males

retained exclusive access to key authoritative posts such as the pastoral office and eldership board membership.

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 and official or great tradition or religious concepts generally reflect men's and not women's priorities and life experiences. But 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 these churches contrary 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, Mother Jane Bloomer of Freetown. In Ivory Coast, Marie Lalou was inspired by a dream to start a cult so that 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 Kawangare and Maria Aoko of Legio Maria who carved niches for themselves in Kenya's religious history.

Bengt Sundkler (1976:79) says that from early times the church was like a women's liberation movement and functioned as one, long before that term was invented. Indeed, he points out numerous examples of churches in South Africa where women excelled as leaders but he also gives instances of women's efforts that failed to receive recognition and appreciation because of gender. An example

is that of Grace Tshabala who brought great revival in her church but was described as “after all she was merely a woman”. Her husband and other Zionst 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 are involved in both the financial burdens and evangelistic outreach is 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 of 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. And as Barrett (1968) claims, it is in the independent church movements of Africa that women had chance to recover some of their traditional status and position which had been undermined by the teaching of the mission churches.

Some charistmic independent churches are more of a man’s world than a woman’s. 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 few male adherents lead the many women*. One Kenyan Independent Church leader once rendered ordination of female priests as a deviation from Christian teachings whose consequence was confusion and called for its immediate end. This was after the ordination of female priests in two of the mainline churches.¹

Leadership is an important feature of any church. Despite their numerical dominance, women rarely occupy top positions in their

church’s administrative hierarchies. Instead they command, what Benetta Jules-Rosette (1979: 127) has termed “ceremonial leadership”, a leadership entailing the use of mystical talents during specified and limited occasions by men.

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 which promote a traditional or even regressive social position of women, while others are welfare oriented and the churches are seen as allowing outlets for expression of leadership qualities and for solving disputes (West 1975: 49; 74-75). The importance of leadership cannot be overstressed. 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. The Nomiya Luo Church (NLC) falls within the category of those churches that failed at the crucial point to solve the issue of the subordination of women in both the society and religion.

The Context of the Emergence of The Nomiya Luo Church (NLC)

The NLC developed among an ethnic group of Nilotic origin, the Luo of Kenya. The Luo society on the eve of colonial rule was patrilineal, exogamous, virilocal and organised into territorial segmentary lineages. Within this system people acquired land primarily through patrilineal inheritance. Under Luo customary law women did not have independent rights in the land but were assigned plots by their husbands. Women had no jurial autonomy and no independent legal rights over their children (Hay 1982: 110-123; Pala 1980; Potash 1978:380-396). Betty Potash’s recent argument that, despite informal methods of getting what they want, most women, given the structure of Luo society, are subordinate to men. This is applicable to the society in colonial times. She states (Potash 1978:384):

Luo men... have considerable formal control over the behaviour of their wives. While women have means of evading such control and regularly do so, if a wife wishes to keep her children and to maintain a good reputation, she must maintain her marriage. To this extent she must conform, at least superficially to her husbands requirements, and must avoid antagonising her mate to the point of separation.

In Luo society a woman's primary role was as a wife and mother and to instruct girls in the importance of obedience to husbands, in mothering and diligent work both in the home and in the garden. Women gained respect in the community largely through bearing many children and raising them well (Ominde 1977: 34-36). The division of labour within a typical homestead was based on sex and age. Women and men had different roles (though overlapping occurred in certain instances). The males were heads of homesteads and sometimes household, depending on the number of wives and family size. In decision making some exerted control over many aspects of household operations while others delegated authority to wives and sons. No matter how involved the men were in household operations, women were in control of the domestic economy (Oswald 1915: 27-28).

The Luo culture valued age and the wisdom it brought. In the past male elders formed territorial councils in which certain wealthy elderly women were able to participate in and even occasionally chair. In addition people always sought the wise words of grandmothers and older women on numerous issues of significance. The *Pim*, an ageing widow, was frequently the one who lived with and trained the girls (Hoehler-Fatton 1995:112). In all matters of protocol, the senior wife (*mikayi*) was also very important. Often she participated in the settlement of homestead land disputes. While women were not expected to express their views publicly, on important matters they were consulted privately.

Before a man took a decision with repercussion on the family he might say "*We apenj orindi mondi* (Let me consult the head rest

before making the decision) (Odaga 1980:22). Men consulted particularly with *mikayi* because of her prominence in performance of all crucial rituals and as the co-owner and participant in decision-making of the homestead. Despite these obvious 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.

The period 1895-1902 was that of recovery for the Luo and marked the establishment of colonial rule. Nyanza had experienced a rinderpest epidemic (*Apamo*) in 1890 which killed many cattle leading to both immediate and long-term adjustments in the balance between pastoralism and agriculture. Homes renowned for wealth in cattle had but a few heads or none at all.² That was followed immediately (1891-1892) by a famine. It is likely that the crucial work of recovery from famine lay in the production and reproduction labour of women (Lonsdale 1977: 23). In some places dowries were either reduced or suspended due to lack of livestock and marriage was perhaps made easier for all men including the poor. Some married men abandoned their wives and left them to fend for themselves. Some young men, on the other hand, might have worked for their fathers' in-law instead of paying the dowries.

The colonial system itself was patriarchal, male institution in all its aspects. It regarded women, even within its own service, as shallow, self centred and the cause of trouble. They had to be dependent on their husbands if married, and as professionals, hold subordinate positions. So for the colonial government Kenya was a man's country. Colonialism generated the alienation of women through practices like the monestisation of several 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 CMS and MHF were also patriarchal in the sense that certain males had authority and they practised the patriarchal hierarchy both in the household and

the church. Both the colonial men and the missionaries viewed women as hysterical, irrational and obedient to nature's impulses more than men and this was even more exaggerated in the case of African women (Hoehler-Fatton 1995: 10). Possibly this is why the British missionaries encouraged their wives to teach African women in domesticity, but again, they could only do this without interfering with the mission's work, that of converting African men.

Basically this was a period in which enormous changes were beginning to take place in the gender order of society since religion and church generate significant gender templates by which people run their lives and build gender order of society. The colonial system, the missionaries and even later the independent churches disrupted the established patriarchal precolonial gender order in multiple ways. This created spaces for African men like Yohana Owalo to open up new spaces and to set out new gender templates for the Luo follow. Some men and some women then moved into these new spaces and built new gender regimes. It was within the situation where existing uncertainties and new forces were beginning to impinge on each other that the NLC arose.

The Founding of the Nomiya Luo Church

Yohana Owalo, the founder of the Nomiya Luo Church (henceforth NLC), was born in Asembo Location, Bondo Districts, Nyanza Province. (Asembo was previously under districts variously named as Central Kavorondo, Central Nyanza, and Kisumu district and after independence Siaya district). Yohana Owalo was the third son born to Abor, son of Otonde, and his second wife, Odimo. He hailed from the Kochieng clan specifically of the lineage of the Kocholla. Owalo's poor background earned him spite and occasional scornful remarks from his own followers. Abor was also polygamous and had five sons and a number of daughters out of this polygamous arrangement. Owalo's own mother had three sons and three daughters whom we were unable to trace during research.³ It is possible that by the time

Owalo started his religious movement he was already orphaned since none of the respondents seemed to recall his parents.⁴

Yohana Owalo, the founder of the NLC, was a man with great experience within the colonial world-view. He got involved with the colonial government, possibly as a porter, when the railway construction was approaching Kisumu before 1900. Probably it was during such visits that he met graduates from Kaimosi who made an impression on him and he decided to remain in Kisumu and study at the Catholic Mission at Kibuye. According to J.J. Willis (n.d.), one such person who impressed him was Daudi Kweto, a Kaimosi old boy, who worked in Kisumu, but who frequently decried the Europeans inadequate understanding of Africans. By October 1905, Owalo was a student in the day school at the Roman Catholic Station, Kibuye. He spent four months at the school and then decided to serve as a "Mission's boy" which he did in the subsequent four months. In June 1906 he was baptised as Johannes. Shortly after this, he left Kisumu to work as a "house boy" for a court judge, one Alexander Morrison, in Monbasa (Willis n.d.). 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 on 1 March 1907 when he was taken to the first, second and third heaven by the spirit. He saw various revelations in these heavens.

After his heavenly experienced, Morrison deterred Owalo from starting his movement until he had acquired adequate education. Consequently he joined the 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 spat with the Muslims in Kisumu and was probably circumcised before he joined the CMS School in Nairobi in 1908. By 1909, he had joined the Church of Scotland in Kikuyu (Opwapo 1981).⁵ In October 1910 he joined Maseno as a teacher but again his controversial beliefs became known and he was expelled in 1912, because of his avowed belief that Jesus was not of

the same substance as God and his rejection of monogamy as basically a European idea and not a biblical one. He left Maseno to start his Mission to the Luo. Later (1914) it was renamed Nomiya Luo Mission. This was the first African Independent Church in Kenya.

This religious movement was attractive to both men and women and spread with such marked rapidity that by 1920 when the founder died, it had spread all over Luoland and into some of the white settled areas. When the expansion of a movement is so rapid, several questions arise, 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 and then articulated it. Owalo built a community out of the breaking pieces of then old and the ill adopted offerings of the new. He introduced a movement attuned to the traditional fears, needs and aspirations. In a society that was undergoing rapid change, with Christianity providing the framework, certain important factors were overlooked. Second, the spiritual, emotional, moral and religious needs of the Luo were ignored. Visions, dreams, spirits and even their notions of God were considered futile. Religion played a very significant part in the day-to-day life of the Luo and was generally practical at the family level. Both sexes performed rituals, which reinforced the existing social order and participated in cults, marked by spirit possession. Men dominated in the arena of lineage-strengthening rites and in making frequent offerings to the ancestors in small shrines located within the *dala*. Women too participated in some of the lineage based religion like the naming of infants and the installation of a married son (Potash 1978:390).

It was however, in the realm of the ecstatic religion that women predominated for they were easily possessed by the various clusters of spirits which only needed to be tamed and harnessed to become useful in society. The Luo recognised the ancestral spirits and the

supreme God; 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 well-being (Odaga 1980:23). The Luo believed in spirits of non-human origin, magic and witchcraft. The society had a need for solutions to existential problems such as fears of the forces of evil, the need for emotional outlet and religious healing. Owalo understood the importance of witchcraft, the tradition of spirit possession; mediumship 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 cases of healing and exorcism, the majority of whom involved women. Exorcism remains a common practice in the NLC.

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. Owalo's movement contributed significantly to the process of deculturation. He curtailed missionary campaigns against certain religious practices, customs and institutions for example, polygamy and ceremonies accompanying death. 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 accepted these as practical arrangements within his movement.

The controversial issue of polygamy was touchy because it was such an integral part of the local culture that people were bewildered with the idea that there should be anything wrong with it. Polygamy was resorted to in instances of childlessness, which was not merely an unfavorable incident, but a calamity. In this case, it served both the man and the woman. The woman could bring in a close relative to be her co-wife to avert the calamity. Second, when a legitimate partner to cohabit with; similarly in instances of ill health another wife was advantage to the ailing woman. In marriages that had shortcomings,

the second marriage saved the first wife from embarrassment and ridicule and gave her the opportunity to correct herself. It was also a moral obligation that in case a girl became pregnant before marriage she could be married off to an elderly man. Polygamy was also a sign of acquisition of wealth, status and power for men and it also contributed to economic independence and social status for women.

The levirate⁶ was also a part of this polygamous arrangement and the nobility and integrity of a homestead depended on how ready its owners were to take up responsibility as when crises arose. A woman who had lost her husband needed a helper/replacement and also the psychological help and care for the well-being of her children. To keep this wife and children in the home a male member of the family of upright standing had to step in as caretaker. This was the best tribute to the dead. This was the best tribute to the dead. This was clearly understood and empathised with by the caretaker's wife because tomorrow it could be her turn. It contributed to the widow's own security in the home and to the promotion of the integrity of the homestead. The levirate was like the social security for widows (Maliu n.d.). By this practice wives 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 would be their levir.

The crusade against polygamy by Christianity affected the entire society but particularly women. Harun Nyakito reported that in instances where a man had a church wedding, his wife took him before the church council if she discovered his intention to marry a second wife. The church council handed him over to the District Commissioner and the man was imprisoned for breaking a law. Owalo himself tried to take a second wife but the first made it impossible for her to stay.⁷

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: 185-202) suggests that women joined independent movements seeking religious legitimisation for the rejected 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 institutions was leading to an assault on the family. Luo women had managed to cooperate with co-wives, polygamy worked for them, in that it guaranteed them some autonomy, personal freedom and greater mobility than would be possible in a monogamous nuclear family. They could also use their position 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.⁸

Owalo authorised men to keep a maximum of four wives if they had interest in leadership positions, but gave no limitation to those who did not harbour such interest. But he advocated for equality and fairness for all wives. He maintained that polygamy was not immoral but scriptural since patriarchs like David, Abraham, and Solomon practised it with no godly retribution and it was more acceptable than adultery (Opwapo 1981:159). 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.

The NLC was an African movement, not only in its leadership and the growing membership, but also especially in its attempt to come to terms with the African existential situation. This Africanness was at first a definite asset. Through it God's word was made to belong to the Luo, thus the Luo regained their self-respect. This movement

attracted all and sundry. Men who had nasty martial experiences with the colonial system joined with whole families. Many of those attracted to the movement were women. Owalo had an agenda for both men and women. Lois Otinda, one of the earliest female adherents recalled that Owalo gathered both men and women and taught them the catechism, reading and writing every afternoon in his early days in Orengo. She was baptised after attending these classes and was given a new name, a mark of a new identity. Owalo's attitude towards women could also have stemmed from his martial experiences. His wife Alila failed to recognise his mission, was rebellious, rude and he regarded her as insane. Since he lacked this female support, he failed to problematise the place of women, instead he was rarely in their company and ordered his leaders to avoid frequent interaction with women.

Membership of the Independent Churches provided certain benefits. Male migrant labour left women with much physical and agricultural labour. Tasks classified as men's work were taken over by women. Hence the life of the Luo woman was defined and dominated by *tich* (work). The concept of work was integral to the way Luo culture depicted and shaped women. Loitering, even as relaxation, was stigmatised hence the church gave innumerable opportunities for women's legitimated socialisation and friendship (Ndeda 1991). Women in particular gained a caring support network outside the formal structures (e.g. fellowship groups with shared experience) of society and the opportunities for personal advancement. These churches also formed a legitimate space within which women freely participated outside the home without question 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 were not rare among women with such stresses. In the small local communities there was relief. Shoe 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. In spite of the relief that women obtained they were not allowed to hold any positions of spiritual leadership. However, women as members of the NLC continued to attain prestige, status and respect (Opwapo 1981:206). This means that the NLC ministered to its members in a personal and meaningful way at the crisis points of life; therefore it obtained results where the mission churches had failed.

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 cultural change. Barrett (1968:147) remarks:

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.

Conclusively, the church's interpretation of Christianity gave women the opportunity to be involved in the churches' activities not as silent observers, but as participating subordinate actors.

Independence and the Subordination of the Luo Women

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 with Luo leadership pattern and the Christian one. He church was is ethic

group and he insisted that only true Luo could be his followers. Owalo was the first leader of the group. He also instituted circumcision as a central feature in leadership. Circumcision was a heavenly mark of distinction but it alienated women from the positions of leadership. In the call of heavenly experience he was to circumcise men alone and this was essential for full membership, which means that women joined as appendages of men. In the early phases of his ministry his adherents could not baptise and when they acquired in 1917 his response was that they were not yet circumcised. He was able to circumcise the first three, and later six. After his death more people were circumcised the first of its significance for leadership. The adherents were proud because this was a mark of uniqueness and set them apart. In 1933, they introduced the circumcision of small boys eight days after birth, which automatically placed a mark of the leadership on the boys from a tender age. The little girl was baptised on the 14th day as a mark of identity with the church (Opwapo 1918:166). However, at his death in 1920, he failed to appoint his successor. He had no son to inherit leadership. Hence after his death wrangles over leadership ensued but later Petro Ouma was recognised as leader.

In 1930 Petro introduced new positions in the leadership structure which included 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 levitic 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 majority 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, location teachers, preachers and lay readers. Lay posts like the general secretary and treasurer were also introduced. All holders of these positions were men. A significant, humble office plagued by persistent problems was that of the *sharriff* (the

circumciser). Those who claimed knowledge of this skill abounded and several decrees had to be promulgated to stop them from practising but to no avail.

The Bishop was the overall head and was assisted by the archdeacon. The chief pastor, who was the direct representative of the bishop, had under him location priests and lay readers who were directly responsible for small communities. The secretary general was responsible for all church correspondence and the administration of the church. The treasurer was in charge of all churches finances. This was the pattern of leadership until 1972 when the whole hierarchy was revised and made even more elaborate.

In the NLC titles, martial status and age assumed significance in conferring status. The ideal leader in addition to being male had to be at least middle aged and married. In leadership, literacy was a requirement but not necessarily a high level of education. Before assuming the position of spiritual leadership ordination and proper consecration was done in the presence of many adherents. During the ordination the leader's responsibilities were clearly delineated to avoid conflicts.

The domination of leadership roles by men shows evidence that in the NLC, women were subordinated. This subordination simply means to put a person, or group, in a less important position (Caufield 1981; Collins, 1971). The subordination of women refers to relations between men and women within the social process as a whole and the way those relationships work to the detriment of women. Collins argues from the Freudian perspective that women's subordination is fundamentally as a result of men's sexual lust and men have used their size and strength to coerce women (Collins, 1971). Tiger on the other hand asserts that male dominance arises from their social bonding.

The argument here is that their subordination was not solely the result of the policies imposed by foreign capital and other forces of colonialism. Rather, patriarchal value systems borrowed patriarchal

control and reinforced and transformed one another evolving into new structures and forms of domination. The contention here is that both Owalo and later church leaders did not seriously challenge the basic structure of gender relations. Hence inequality between men and women remained rooted and perpetuated. Conclusively, independence, which becomes institutionalised, has largely lost its liberating function for women as it reinstates, determines and distorts traditional values. The NLC mainly affirmed traditional relations of domination between men and women. Thus women continued to be 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 the subordination of women was rubber stamped by the NLC.

Despite the attractions of this movement, it should be noted that the society within which it emerged was guided by strong patriarchal tendencies, which 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. The tendencies caused 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 were men. The main figures in the church were the bishops, elders, and administrators. 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, and potential and self-worth because they were unconsciously victims of male dominance, social prejudices and discrimination. Their valuable contribution to the church was either insignificantly appreciated, or not at all.

In the church, men regarded themselves as superior to women and as their roles increased in number and importance so women were denied equal opportunities in church. Women were not appointed into the critical areas of decision-making and participation like the NLC gatherings of leaders. They were also excluded from the leadership role in all public rituals, for example, no women officiated as elders during ordination and baptismal ceremonies or as *sharrif* (the circumciser). But it should be noted that during circumcision an elderly woman was present with the ritual cleansing before the operation. At the official level of church organisation women were seemingly excluded from positions of authority, for at the death of Owalo his close adherents and the bearers of his mantle and vision were men. However, women played the same domestic roles they filled in other areas of life such as cleaning the church, cooking and serving during their ceremonial functions, and organising prayers for the sick but were never assigned priestly functions (Opwapo 1981:185). They also led in the solos and directed the church singing on Sundays and other occasion because music as a form of presentation and expression was greatly appreciated by women.

When Owalo began to teach in any locale, prayers were held both at dawn and dusk. A bell was rang to alert the neighbouring adherents to gather in the leader's home for prayers. Such gatherings soon fell under the leadership of women and occurred extensively in the 1920s and 1930s as labour migrancy rapidly become the lifestyle of the Luo males. Wives of the leaders sustained such prayers in their homes long after their husbands died, for example, Saphira Okanja kept this practice for thirty years after the death of her husband in 1954. This is responsibility which women undertook without due recognition, yet it served as a discipleship programme, sustained the *dala* concept, made the church unique, and was the lifeline of the church (Opwapo 1981:148)

The female religious participation, religious metaphors and beliefs concerning female sexuality are all evidences of the existing subordination. Female religious metaphors for example, derived from the sexual and reproductive status such as *Nyasach dhako* meaning the uterus. The uterus was considered the point where life began and God did his moulding work. Reference to the uterus only in her ability to give birth. There was also the age held belief that female sexuality was polluting and contaminating to all things. Hence a woman was rendered incapable of leading worship service or the singing if she should be menstruating.

Her sexuality was also seen as needing periodic purification, for example, after birth of a child the woman was confined for a period of either 33 days or 66 days depending on the sex of the child. This period ended with a covenant feast (*sawo*) in which chicken and or other animals were sacrificed to mark the end of the period of confinement, the woman was under the care of an elderly woman, ate special dishes, was confined to specified sections of her house, was to remain indoors, was not to touch the husbands or her church clothes, bible and prayer book, and had no sexual relations with the husband during this period. In other words she was in a state of sexual taboo.

Even those independent churches which involve women in ministry still evoke inauspiciousness of the energy which emanates from females sexuality and use it to curtail women's involvement e.g., 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* (covenant celebrations

after period of confinement) it was women who directly helped their colleagues throughout the period of confinement. But at the end of the period the church male leaders officiated in the purification ceremony and were served the delicious sections of the meal as specified by the religious movement for instance, the chicken roast and the kidneys and livers of the animal. Males on the other hand, performed rituals that were beneficial to the whole group and in the public domain, for example, baptism and circumcision. While men officiated in the funeral services, it is the women who participated in the funerary dirges. The dirges involved the *sigweya*- poetic praises recalling the heroic performances of the deceased. Saphira Okanja did this woeful lamentation while recounting the exploits of Owalo the day he died.⁹

Why were women subordinate? Paradoxically women attended church in greater numbers than men and this largely agrees with the commonly held view that women are intuitive, receptive to religious experience and by nature more devout than men. Yet women were confined to the domestic sphere often in some form of seclusion or, even if they were allowed to move in public spaces, there were numerous social conventions. Second, they were excluded from formal religion and from participating in important public rituals. They might have been important in possession cults and healing rites but these were extensions of the traditional female roles. On the other hand, the few men who attended the church held prominent roles, performed religious rituals, formulated dogma, provided those divinely inspired ideas and controlled the powers of female reproductivity and dictated social and cultural roles of women.

In the history of the NLC women have been exploited by male adherents but not given equivalent status. In 1930, Elisha Adet a recalcitrant member of NLC took about 12 married women to Chula Ndere against the mandate of the colonial government (and the advice of NLC leadership) because he had a fresh vision, which required him

to receive commandments, instructions and structures from God. But it seems the women were only used for sex for when they returned six months later the majority were not only pregnant, but also sick. Similarly in 1961 when James Owigo Pesa emerged among these NLC's adherents 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.

Whereas women were freed from their political responsibilities they had expressive powers that operated chiefly in ceremonies and settings managed by female elders. Because they lacked legitimate authority women based their leadership upon two forms of power: the mystical power based upon spiritual gifts, which operated like *Muya* (Holy Spirit). And since the 1960s, the direct control of situated interaction. As already mentioned, most of the NLC ritual activities were distinguished by gender marked expectations and differences in participation.

The concept of Christianity 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 was denied women whenever men were present at a ritual of events, Luo women show respect and express their control through their informal leadership. Through this interaction, women controlled and directed the sense of ceremonies and other ritualised behaviour without formally acknowledged leadership roles. This was evident in the participation in song (Opwapo 1981). The women would be reprimanded when their participation transgressed the boundaries of sin, healing and mediumship. However, during ritual the routine exercise of power occurred through song intervention. Intervention with song allowed the woman to redirect sermon topics to present moral lessons that criticise the types of wrong doings they associate with men.

Women also derived power from the sub realm detached from public authority namely, the all female enclaves. Women developed social networks, or enclaves, that became their control bedrocks where their power and authority developed. These enclaves allowed them to discuss issues that concerned them and place pressure on the leadership- overt pressure that could cause certain decision to be made. Women could also attain positions of authority within the congregation based on relationship to authoritative men. Perhaps they also exercised considerable informal authority through their husbands or their fathers. This kind of authority was ascribed to and could be similar to the authority and influence of *mikayi* among the Luo. Women also held congregational power. A crisis affecting the morale of the congregation could lift what might be described as a delicate dance between male authority and female power in church life. When trouble hit the NLC the women revealed that they had bargained with rather than surrendered to patriarchy. They remained tangible factors in the social control mechanism of the group. They used overt and ambiguous ways to address women's concerns. 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. However, it should be noted that in moments of crisis and division in the church the support and participation of women became quite significant because of their vocal participation and the ability to tread where men feared. Often they saved the church from very serious splits as in 1962/63 and in the early 1930s and 1950s.

For men, preaching was a routine aspect of ritual leadership. The sermons were performed in concert with a reader who presented a passage, which was elaborated upon by a speaker in antiphonal fashion. Women remained seated and initiated song from this position. The women's interruption was 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 was complementary to that of men. In the curing ceremony, women played an active and instrumental role. Healing would be like an extension of normal routine domestic activity. Midwifery (*nyamrerwa*) was confined to the older women.

In the area of religious values, gender was not a decisive symbol: equality of gender prevailed. The salvific relationship was shaped, not by sexual dominion or sexual polarity, but sexual unity. So soteriologically women and men are equal. The other sifting values gave men authority but the personal relationship with a living deity was available equally to men and women. As far as this was concerned the significance of gender was a moot point. To date one of the articles of faith is that the NLC will provide eternal life for all its adherents. The words of E. Sullerot (1971:233) aptly conclude 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.

The NLC has survived in a world that has experienced several changes. It is a world where both in the secular world and the church, women are speaking with a new voice and a new urgency. In conferences, seminars and discussion groups of various kinds the issue of women's roles is being addressed. It is amazing that in spite of political independence, the Women's Decade (1975-1985), post-Nairobi and now Beijing, this church that has emerged out of changed circumstances has not considered ordaining women as priests to date or changing the rules concerning women's participation. Women may be vocal in situations of disagreement and infighting, in the music and even dance and participate actively as preachers in *mony* (night vigils) and in the ceremonies neatness parades but to date they will be

reminded that they are mere women when it comes to issues of significance

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 mean provision of education since the majority of the women folks are either illiterate or semiliterate. Thus they are incapable of participating in certain deliberations and discourses requiring literacy. This is part of the church population that has distinguished itself for its love of the church and willingness to commit itself to work in the church. These women were and are actually the pillars of the church, always active, strong and ready to carry forth the mission of the church. With this in mind it is necessary for the church to authenticate the ministry of women.

Conclusion

Within these independency 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, for even in religious framework 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 that seems 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).

For its own survival and future effectiveness, the NLC needs to address the issue of the liberation of women. Women must be given roles in decision making and this will help towards equity. It should also come to grips with its own concept of vocation and perhaps develop

a consciousness of gender related issues. Both long-term and historical effects and presents day realities need to be understood and evaluated, as far as this is possible. 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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Notes

1. Kenya News Agency, 18th January, 1983.
2. Data of this epidemic is confused; some out it at 1883, or mid 1880s or 1890.
3. Oyungu, interview; James Ojuok, interview, Ougo Asembo, February 19, 1980.
4. The followers who were interviewed were: Okech, Oyungu, Okanada, Meshack Onyango, Otinda, Okanja, Oundo, Adhing'a, Ojuok, N.A. Onyango, Mathia Owade and Mariko Ouko
5. For details on the life of Owalo see also files Judicial 1/297 and Judicial 1/474, KNA Nairobi.
6. The practice whereby on a man's death, his brother inherited his widow and through her he was to raise children to carry on the line.
7. Oral interview, with Harun Nyakito, on 12th January 1980, at Oboch.
8. Not all homes were necessarily polygamous but polygamy is one institution that literally impacted on each and every member of the community. In colonial times *dala* (homestead) remained the basic unit of society politically, socially, and economically.
9. Oral interview with Saphira Okanja, Kapetro, 15th December 1979.

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