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NOMIYA LUO CHURCH: A gender analysis of the dynamics of an African Independent Church in Siaya district, Kenya, c.1907 to 1963

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, 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 the 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 in Africa is a growing field. Publications have increased exponentially 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; Lantemari 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.

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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 remarkably 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 (Baeta1962:6). By 1966, there were 
166 independent churches in Kenya and by 1978 they had become a matter 
of concern to the post-independence state (Barrett 1968:30).

These movements have not only reshaped but also rocked the stability 
of the mainline churches. Their aim has been to rectify the Christianity of the 
mainline churches by injecting into their religious movements, the dynamic 
aspects, social mannerisms and the world-view of the traditional religion and 
the practical aspects of the gospels. With the rise of these movements a 
new conception of the cure of souls and an African theology has been 
brought into being with a new appreciation of the African personality and its 
cultural and religious customs (Barrett 1970: 153).

The rapid increase in the number of independent churches in Kenya has 
attracted the attention of scholars who have extensively documented their 
rise, spread practices and theological stances (Muga 1975; Opwapo1981; 
Parrin-Jassy 1973; Wipper 1977). In Kenya these independent movements 
have been described, at least in the colonial period, from the viewpoints of 
westerners. Sex, superstition, magic, witchcraft have been given promi­
nence by journalists and novelists in their reports on independent churches. 
The government and the missionary churches reinforced this picture. Some 
scholars also supported the colonial view (Lonsdale 1964:363; Ogot 

There is such a great deal of literature available currently on 
independent churches in Kenya that it is difficult to review it all in a work of
this magnitude (Muga 1975; Ogot, 1973; Welbourn & Ogot 1966; Wipper 1977). Currently, various sympathetic approaches have been given to the study of these independent churches. These studies make important, though seemingly contradictory, contributions to the understanding of religion and change in Kenya.

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 to women than to men. Nearly every major study of these groups has commented that the women comprised a majority of the adherents of the churches they studied (Barrett 1968:148; Jules-Rosette 1979:127; Sundkler1961; Sundkler 1976:79). These studies do not however, analyse their participation and role in the process of social transformation in these churches. Women have played significant roles either directly or indirectly in the troubled life of the church in recent years and especially in that of 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 in the way in which gender shapes religious ideology and the experience of conversion has not been central to the analysis of these studies.

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. 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 and their own hidden sub-cultures and practices which definitely influence the groups, are discussed. To aid in the analysis of these issues a case study has been identified – that of the Nomiya Luo Church, the first African Independent church in Kenya. Hence the history and attractions of the Nomiya Luo Church are outlined.

This church developed among a group of people with a semi patriarchal set up hence we analyse male dominance and its persistence even in church. The ways these systems have exerted controls on women and some of the religious doctrines, beliefs and values that impact on the lives of women are also discussed. The intention is to establish the gender roles and attitudes in this church.
INDEPENDENCE, GENDER AND WOMEN'S ROLES

Kretzshmar (1991:106-119) asks why it is necessary for issues of gender 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 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.

Gender simply refers to the qualitative and interdependent character of women and men's position in society. Gender relations are constituted in terms of the relations of power and dominance that structure the life chances 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 ones 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 fewer shares 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 a person for (or disqualified the person) from
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 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 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 curved 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 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 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, 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 the chance to recover some of their traditional status and position which had been undermined by the teaching of the mission churches.

Some charismatic 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 ceremonies of female priests in two of the mainline churches.

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. 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. 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 authorised 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 solution of 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 Nomiva Lun

Church (NLC) falls within the category of those churches that failed at the crucial point to deal with the issue of the subordination of women both in 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, virilocally organised 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 land but were assigned plots by their husbands. Women had no jural 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 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 girls were instructed in the importance of obedience to husbands, responsible 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 overlap occurred in certain instances). The males were heads of homesteads and sometimes households 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 seemed to bring. In the past male elders formed territorial councils that 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 repercussions 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. 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 (Lonsdale1977:23). 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 situation was exacerbated by the 1897 famine, Odila, which was caused by a prolonged drought in Eastern Africa and was accompanied by severe natural calamities such as sleeping sickness, pleuro-pneumonia, jiggers, small pox and malaria (Ochieng1987:4). In September 1899 there was a serious outbreak of small pox among the Africans employed as Askaris at Port Ugowe. Those who had gone out to labour for the colonial

3 Date of this epidemic is confused; some put it at 1883, or mid 1880s or 1890. It is possible that there were numerous other cattle epidemics but this particular one took place in 1890 because travellers in Nyanza during this period do not mention cattle of any magnitude at all (e.g. Harry Johnstone 1902). See also Hay, M.J., Economic change in Luoland: Kowe 1890-1945. Ph D thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1972, p.89.
system spread this into the Luo localities. In the midst of these challenges Luoland was colonised in 1894 and between then and 1900 several punitive expeditions subjugated those who did not submit peacefully. By December 1901 the colonial administrative headquarters were moved from Mumias to the Lakeside Port Ugowe (later renamed Kisumu). A rudimentary system of tax collection was introduced in June 1901 and a fairly systematic method of collection set up in Kisumu and its environs. In 1902 Nyanza was transferred to the East African Protectorate. Sir Charles Elliott, the governor of the East African Protectorate from 1900, quickly divided it into two provinces: Kisumu and Naivasha (later “Whiteman’s highlands”). Naivasha, was reserved for European occupation, while a large African population inhabited Kisumu. The fertile highland (Rift Valley) offered a promising prospect of developing large agricultural estates. Settlers came in like waves, with peaks in 1904 and 1908. By 1913 they were about 6,000 (Huxley 1935:213). The spurt in settlement created the labour problem (Ochieng 1987:112-118). More details on the labour situation in Nyanza are given in my doctoral thesis (Ndenga 1991). The Luo never gave up land but it was the migrant labour that was disastrous.

The appearance of the British colonial government brought about profound modifications in social, political, economic and cultural structures. Politically, they supported collaborating chiefs against non-collaborationists and this led to political dependence and the Luo who were accustomed to consensus policies had now to obey orders. The men who were best known for mobilising large numbers of porters, despite the general collapse of authority, were soon recognised as paramount chiefs. The introduction of tax in 1900, forced the monetary economy which attracted a great number of young men to labour migration to the extent that the administration got concerned about local manual labour particularly during the two World Wars. The introduction of taxes, the development of schooling, and the labour migration of young men undermined the authority of the head of the family. Of course, the disintegration of the family institution resulted in the deterioration of the traditional culture.

The disintegration of the society, the usual result of European impact, was evident as early as 1910. At the time, John Ainsworth, Nyanza Provincial Commissioner, lamented:

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4 Diary, DC/CN/5/1, December 1899, KNA.
5 Nyanza Province was known as Kisumu Province up to October 1909 when it was changed.
...with the best of intentions in the world and from the highest motives people have made blunders through ignorance.... The white man has suddenly arrived; ignorant of the local conditions he has thrust himself on the aboriginal inhabitants who are in a state of lower barbarism; and he is filled with the desire to supplement native methods of action and thought and effect changes rather than let the natives work out their own salvation.

Although the lament sounds derogatory, it formed the conclusion of the anthropological studies that Ainsworth undertook in Western Kenya. Despite the friendly relations between the Luo and the European and the absence of settlers in the Luo homeland there was an anti-European undercurrent. As migrant workers, the Luo were heavily exposed to European racial and paternalistic attitudes which did not allow the African to be accepted as an equal.

Missionaries together with the colonial government, hastened the transformation of Luo society, which was already bedevilled by numerous ills. Nyanza's first missionaries were an extension of the missionary enterprise in Buganda (Divern 1970:56). From the Nsamba part of Kampala, the Mill Hill Fathers (MHF) founded a mission in Kisumu in 1903; this marked the start of Catholic work among the Luo. Two years later, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) established herself, first at Vihiga, and moved to Maseno a year later. J.M. Lonsdale (1977:5) remarks: "Both the CMS and Mill Hill Fathers relied heavily upon Buganda pastors and teachers in the days before Nyanza could provide its own."

As contact with the African population proved difficult in Kisumu for the MHF, they opened a station in October 1904 at Ojola, about 14 kilometres away. The founder of the NLC studied and worked both in Kisumu and Ojola (Gale1959:266-267). The Mission embarked on education, which seemed significant for the future expansion and influence of the Catholic Church (Oliver 1967:276). There was, however, an acute shortage of personnel for pastoral work and evangelisation. Although the Africans helped with the work in the Missionary stations, they were never given any status. Any clear open clash between the Catholic Church and the Luo society is not evident. F.B. Welbourn (1965:106) observes:

But in regard to tribal customs in general, ... the Roman Catholics have been less disturbed than other Christians. They have regarded the customs which offend the conscience of Western Christianity do not necessarily endanger the soul's chance of salvation.

Catholic missionaries were, however, confident that education would gradually eliminate the unacceptable beliefs and practices. They were ill prepared to understand the traditional society or the subtle, yet, disastrous effects of culture clash. The resulting breakdown of traditional beliefs and practices did not, however, result in open clash, but it smouldered under the surface and produced strains and stresses that were the results of disaffections. This would probably explain why Yohana Owalo, the founder of the NLC, managed, without any problems, to stop the Ojola catechists from reciting “Hail Mary” and the intercession of the saints (Gale 1959:267).

In 1905 the CMS posted J.J. Willis to Maseno to start a mission among the Luo. In Nyanza there were already many protestant Missions. In 1907, under the instigation of Willis, they discussed spheres of influence and the Luo area became the special CMS sphere. Capon (1962:6) describes the protestant missions in Towards unity in Kenya as do Welbourn and Ogot (1966:7-31) in A place to feel at home: A study of two Independent churches in Western Kenya. Perhaps these protestant divisions later impacted on the emergence of African Independent churches. J.M. Lonsdale gives four factors in the Nyanza environment that determined the character of the movements. The first related to the religious tug of war that existed in Nyanza. Mutual understanding existed between the missionaries and the government so the Africans concluded that they had similar objectives. The second factor included the more immediate friction of foreign rule, such as taxation, which forced people to go out far from home to labour. Third, the multiplicity of missions confused the people. Moreover, in Nyanza independence was not purely an African phenomenon. Willis Hotchkiss of the Friends African Industrial Mission, established an independent mission in Lumbwa. Multiplicity of missions was an invitation for 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 the basis for the emergence of the NLC.

Between 1906 and 1912, Willis, leader of the CMS Mission in Nyanza, aimed at creating a self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing native church (Welbourn & Ogot 1966:23). The Luo showed a self-reliant spirit, which met with Willis’s approval, as he made clear in an article in the Uganda Notes in 1916 (Welbourn & Ogot 1966:24-25). In 1906, Willis visited and requested African chiefs to send their sons to Maseno to be educated. (Coincidentally in 1908, the government, in their attempt at Westernisation, ordered the education of the sons of chiefs). In 1910, he had the first baptism and in 1912 the first Maseno graduates left school to work as teachers, church ministers and in some cases as chiefs. Maseno
was indeed where Owalo resided just before he moved to start his mission.

In Nyanza after 1912, many other CMS schools and centres were established whose main purpose was to convert the Africans, prepare new converts to live in the new society, and teach the sons of chiefs in a Christian atmosphere so that in the event that they became chiefs, they would Christianise the population (Odwako 1975:53). From the outset, the CMS maintained a relationship of respect with the Luo society. They did, however oppose a handful of traditional institutions inimical to European ideas of morality. Consequently, in spite of the history of vigorous and progressive church growth, occasional reaction and religious protest began almost at once.

The colonial system itself was patriarchal, a male institution in all its aspects and 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 professional, hold subordinate positions. So for the colonial government Kenya was a man’s country. Colonialism generated the alienation of women through practices like the monetisation 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 missions work, that of converting African men.

The adoption of western customs and teaching seemed indispensable to a true understanding and practice of Christianity. This had far-reaching implications and affected the world-view, beliefs, customs and practices. The Luo society was visibly in a state of transition, a stage of betwixt and between, with the attendant anxiety, tension and confusion being felt at virtually every facet of life of the people. The destabilisation of the religious beliefs clearly left wide gaps in the social structure, particularly in the bonds of interpersonal and inter-group relationships. Disintegration set in affecting the close-knit structures of society, socio-economic patterns, participation in communal obligations and rights. As soon as the impact became felt, reaction started in the form of religious movements or political associations. Basically this was also a period in which enormous changes were
beginning to take place in the gender order of society since religion and
curch 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 to 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 District, Nyanza Province. (Asembo
was previously under districts variously named as Central Kavirondo,
Central Nyanza, and Kisumu district and after independence Siaya district.)
Yohana Owalo was the third born son to Abor, son of Otonde, and his
second wife, Odimo. He hailed from the Kochieng clan specifically of the
lineage of the Kochollia. In an undated manuscript, J.J. Willis (n.d.) described
his home area as “Ayoro’s Asembo” indicating that this was the headman for
the area when Willis began to interact with Owalo.7 Owalo’s father, Abor son
of Otonde, was not by traditional standards, a rich man. Like all other Luo he
was recovering from the hazards that had only recently affected their cattle.
It is probable that, at his death, his other sons squandered the few cattle he
had. 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.8 It is possible that by the time Owalo started
his religious movement he was already orphaned since none of the

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7 Harun Nyakito, interview, Oboch, January 12, 1980; Meshack Onyango, interview, Ndvara
Asembo, December 9, 1979; Saphira Okanja, interview, Oboch, December 15, 1979; Elija Okanda,
interview, Seme Korango, December 16, 1979; Loise Otinda, interview, Ralingo Asembo, January
13, 1980.

8 Oyungu, interview; James Ojuok, interview, Ougo Asembo, February 19, 1980.
respondents seemed to recall his parents.\textsuperscript{9}

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 Mombasa (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. He noted that the first heaven, the abode of men was a remarkable place. He noted the presence of Mary and many other women whose identity he did not know. 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 (including the Pope), the Goans and the Indian Banyans were thwarted violently. They failed to meet the conditionality.\textsuperscript{10}

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:

\begin{quote}
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
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{9} The followers who were interviewed were: Okech, Oyungu, Okanda, Meshack Onyango, Otinda, Okanja, Undu, Adhing’a, Ojuok, N.A. Onyango, Mathia Owade and Mariko Ouko.

Owalo was instructed to discard all human efforts to reach God (e.g. 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 (NLC Prayer Book 1973:118). Hoehler-Fatton (1995:74-75) equates Owalo's Heavenly experience with the Holy Spirit and that Owalo was indeed the first man in Nyanza to receive the Holy Spirit. She states that the vision that Owalo had contains grounds for such an interpretation. Owalo's vision reflects his experience with a variety of religious traditions.

His mystical journey through a multifaceted heaven is similar to an account given by Saint John in the book of Revelation but it is also highly reminiscent of the Swahili epic "Utenzi wa Miraji" (The Ascent), which details Muhammad's guided tour through the levels of heavens and his encounter with important souls of deceased prophets and patriarchs along the way. Jesus's order that Owalo not bow before him similarly evokes the well known Islamic legend of Iblis, the fallen angel who refused to bow down to Adam but would worship God only. Islam's oneness of divinity could have reinforced whatever Owalo might have learnt from his Unitarian employer about the nature of God, leading him to reject the Catholic and Anglican triune God (Hoehler-Fatton 1995:74-75).

After his heavenly experience, 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 spate 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). 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

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11 This is reminiscent of Isaiah 43 verse 10 and the command given the Prophet Muhammad by Allah to take a well-sharpened sword.

12 For details on the life of Owalo see also files Judicial 1/297 and Judicial 1/474, KNA Nairobi.
to the Luo. Later (1914) it was renamed Nomiya Luo Mission. This was the first African Independent Church in Kenya.¹³

The thesis that churches such as these have merely arisen as a reaction to colonial oppression does not account for enough (Lanternari 1963). Certainly the link between colonial oppression and initial religious reactions is clear and has been proven by scholars (Balandier 1953: 41-65; Lanternari 1963: 19-62). But the situation is more complex. It has to do with the types of problems that religious and secular authorities within a given group already handle and their susceptibility to, and contacts with, external groups. A lot of literature on Yohana Owalo shows political causes as basic to theories of the emergence of the NLC. Lonsdale (1964:208) and Wipper (1977:175) suggest that Owalo utilised the movement as a vehicle for interplay rivalry, since he belonged to the clan traditionally opposed to the chiefly clan. Oginga Odinga (1968:68-69) says that the movement was a political protest and 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." Ogot (1973:362) 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.

In spite of these indicators, to conclude that political reasons were basic to the rise of this movement seems simplistic. A new religious movement is not necessarily opted for as a political outlet. Its presence, therefore, does not signify in itself the frustration of other expressions of power. In his call, the only indication of rebellion is the instance where the Europeans, Indian-Banyans 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 places when 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 had already responded violently to such movements.

¹³ His mission was to the Luo, first because this was his tribe and like Jesus and Muhammad their call was initially to their own people. He had to earn a means of escape for his people first. I also think that in a society that was divided along racial lines Owalo could only think in this manner.
Examples of such responses like the cult of Mumbo in South Nyanza and the Chilembwe uprising of 1915 in Malawi, that were dealt with mercilessly between 1913-1915 abound (Wipper 1977:32-40). Before the movement could be registered, Owalo had to prove that it 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. When it was evident that the movement was “not subversive to good order and morality,” it was registered during which time he got a political appointment to serve as the sub-headman for Kochieng’s clan.  

A reconstruction of the history of this movement reveals that religious movements go through several phases and that its relations to a larger political context changes overtime.

Owalo had a poor family background and perhaps sought the economic prosperity portrayed in the mainline churches. However, economic causalities may not be adequate explanations for its emergence. The Oboch mission station simply supplied the food requirements of the numerous adherents, comprising both men and women, who resided with him. This station was established to afford adherents ample time as they jointly prepared for missionary work and served as a haven 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.

Hoehler-Fatton (1995: 70-71) states that when the first missionaries arrived in East Africa, they opened mission stations that operated as insulated, strictly run colonies that evolved around the figure of the founding missionary. People identified the individual missionary with the message that he brought. As early as 1910, Christian converts in Western Kenya began to turn their homes into mission stations and by 1916 Willis was remarking that there were a large number of Christian congregations in this area under the self imposed charge of an African convert who may have no contact with a European mission for years. This means that by Owalo’s time the dala paradigm (Christian homestead) was in vogue, hence Owalo and his adherents did nothing out of the normal. They merely turned his home into a Christian mission home revolving a round his person as a prophet based on the dala paradigm which had become an integral part of Christianity, mainly the CMS. The Christians who resided here adhered to a very strict prayer schedule, fasted, were instructed in scripture and obeyed the leader.

That Owalo’s followers revered him and moved to his compound and accepted his teaching was not a sign of manipulation and self-
aggrandisement on his part. Such reverence was not exceptional in an environment in which one's religious identity was profoundly tied to the person heading the mission station. Taken in context, we can now see why Owalo's followers did not find their obedience to him excessive or in any conflict with their faith. Hence, the appeal of a new movement can be approached but not completely explained in terms of economic variables or even ethnicity.

Although the Luo were willing and even eager to derive benefits from the new conditions they disrupted traditional patterns. Respect for taboos, structures and values on which the society depended for its security and harmony were beginning to shake (Ndeda 1992). Solidarity of the clan and family was under constant attack, particularly due to the colonial labour policies that required that men leave home to work, and the missionary concept of the Christian marriage. The stability of marriage patterns, including polygamy, the levirate, divorce and dowry were beginning to disintegrate and yet there were no new and secure alternatives. Since the traditional methods for obtaining leadership and prestige were no longer accepted, disappointment and loss of identity were beginning to be experienced and emotional need too did not receive the normal outlet. 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 and yet with a wider experience due to interaction with people from other parts of Kenya and he was aware of their responses to colonialism. Probably, he 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 (1975:167) 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.

Wilson (1970:231) claims that those who start their own religious movements are relatively deprived. But it should be borne in mind that separation sometimes arises in schism from existing sects without operation of external causes. That Owalo was religiously dissatisfied can be inferred from his movement from one denomination to another and even from Christianity to Islam. The type of Christianity introduced did not seem suited to his needs and understanding, he needed an institution, claiming equality with Christianity and Islam but superior in quality to the type of 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, consequently, to usher the Luo, who accepted his message, into heaven. The Luo also had to have a unique experience like Jews and Arabs, that of circumcision of the male adherents. The Luo structures of uniqueness and power had been interfered with by the colonial system so there was need for a practice to enhance the Luo patriarchy.

In the call of heavenly experience recorded earlier, theological issues seemed to be basic to the rise of NLC. He refuted the reliability of the Catholic doctrine of purgatory since on his way to heaven he saw hell alone, not purgatory. Consequently the NLC instructs against the belief in purgatory for at death one is ushered into heaven or hell depending on his life style 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 was informed that the Pope was barred from entry into heaven for misleading the faithful to rely on relics and images in worship and to believe in the intercession of the saints.

In the third heaven the Catholic sacrament of the Holy Mass, was rendered an unacceptable sacrifice before God and Owalo was to teach his adherents that the only acceptable sacrifice was a broken and contrite heart. The practice of the sacrament of bread and wine, which Catholics considers 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 held the belief that Jesus Christ was 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 perfect man endowed with power to perform miracles to furnish evidence that he was God's messenger. Perhaps, this is why Ogot (1973:256), Willis (1910-1912) and Whisson (1964:154) describe him as a "Unitarian" and suggest that the Unitarian Judge, Alexander Morrison, impacted on him. Since Owalo had an intimate relationship with Alexander Morrison, it is possible that, apart from working together on the study of Luo grammar, they discussed serious theological ideas (Opwapo 1981:18).

The two most immediate causes were: first, the fact that he was called by God in March 1907; and second, the action of the council in Maseno,
which caused him to leave Maseno prematurely to start his own Mission. 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. However, Owalo was not a weak and frivolous character but engaged in a most serious search for a more acceptable reality. With the magnitude of his experience and as a courageous person he noted a problem and sought a solution. When he had established what seemed relevant to a people who had to adjust to change, he started propagating it in 1912: His main concern was his tribe, the Luo and one that has persistently affected the expansion of the church.

Conclusively, Owalo seemed to be an original and imaginative thinker and, despite his limited education, had the charisma of leadership that enabled him to win followers. Second, Owalo’s movement had both religious and political components, but the political aspect was disguised in his theology. His was an attempt to create dialogue between Luo traditional beliefs, Islam and Christianity by looking for meaningful experiences in different traditions in a rapidly changing society. He used the idea of the centrality of God in the three traditions and related every other idea to it.

The advance of the African NLC did not come about by an organised evangelisation effort, but either by a migratory movement of one person, which continued throughout the colonial period or through the initiative of local adherents. The church developed through contact. A new community usually formed around the first convert or converts, and most of his converts seemed to be fairly rich by local standards, for 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 is that of Tanzania’s North Mara. One Nickodemu Siwa who reached here accidentally while searching for pasture introduced the NLC in North Mara in 1929. He settled at Ochuna where he formed the first community. With the development of the movement in the area, he became the Bishop, then relinquishing daily affairs to his assistant, he settled in another area of the district because the pasture was exhausted. After settling down in North Mara he then invited other members from Kenya to visit and baptise the new converts.

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 slackened. After 1920, there were adherents in North Mara District of Tanzania, Gem Ahono and Alego. Expansion continued up to the early 1930s and the 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." However, soon after 1934, the government report said that, "The Nomiya Luo Church continues to function but I have not heard it spreading.\textsuperscript{15} Whereas its expansion could have been curbed by the pattern it took, the most serious drawbacks were connected with internal feuds. The church experienced a crisis on the death of the founder. Beginning from 1920, it survived 16 and a half years of crisis over leadership. Crisis again engulfed the church for a while after 1954 and in 1961.

THE ATTRACTIONS OF THE NOMIYA LUO CHURCH

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 he recognised the situation of the Luo Community in the face of colonialism. He capitalised on this situation and then articulated it. Owalo built a community out of the breaking pieces of the 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 spirit possession cults. 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.

\textsuperscript{15} Central Nyanza Annual Report, DC/CN1/6/2, 1932-34:KNA, p.27.
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 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 and 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. For example, on December 2, 1979, during a funeral ceremony, a possessed woman was exorcised. There was a lot of singing and dancing after the spirits left the woman.

In Owalo's teaching, he laid emphasis on the spiritual world, especially on angels, perhaps again emerging from his heavenly trip where he was not only under the escort of Gabriel and Raphael, but saw many angels. It can be inferred that, for him, angels comfortably replaced the Luo cluster of spirits. Second, whereas the healing world was ignored and rejected as futile, Owalo prayed for the sick and exorcised the possessed. Third, 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. His 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 unfavourable 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 wife was pregnant or lactating, which was a long time, the man had a legitimate partner to cohabit with; similarly in instances of ill health another wife was an 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 in 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 levirate\(^{16}\) 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 and 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 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 (Mailu n.d.). 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 \textit{chii iel} (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 directly 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. One Naaman Ogalo of Ndira Sakwa was imprisoned for six months. Chief Daniel Odindo was forced to send away his four wives but he recalled them and joined the NLC. Owalo himself tried to take a second wife but the first made it impossible for her to stay.\(^{17}\)

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

\(^{16}\) 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.

\(^{17}\) Oral interview, with Harun Nyakito, on 12\textsuperscript{th} January 1980, at Oboch.
seeking religious legitimisation for the rejection of the 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 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.\(^{18}\)

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 interests. 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. Owalo actually stopped Daudi Migot, his colleague in Maseno, from divorcing his second wife. Adherents such as Samuel Otieno of Manyatta, and Nickodemu Tambo of Nyakach, joined the movement because of its teaching on polygamy.\(^{19}\)

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\(^{18}\) 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 da\(\text{a}\) (homestead) remained 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, usually a man, was the primary authority in his compound. In the 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, \(\text{\textit{wuon ot}}\), that is, the head of the house and the leader of its domestic and economic activities.

\(^{19}\) CMS (CPK Maseno South) Marriage records 1908-1924. Oral interviews with E. Okanda and Jacobo Okech and Yona Oyungu. I met Daudi Migot's second wife and she vividly related the incident. She was a staunch NLC adherent and the only living person in the home of Migot in January 18, 1980, Wang'arot, Seme. The adherents discussed this issue with a lot of pride. One Ooro s/o Aulo had 8 wives but was allowed into leadership because he had been an adherent for
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 and therefore, anybody intending to marry was advised to negotiate with the parents of the girl and to fulfil the dowry according to the traditional requirements. When, in 1914, his effort to get such marriages officially registered by the colonial government in Kisumu failed he instituted his own pattern of marriage arrangement that was in line with the community's arrangement. Henceforth when dowry requirement was met, the faithful gathered in the groom's home as a group went to ceremonially 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. This may not necessarily have been important but Owalo also sought means of legitimating this significant practice among the Luo. After his death all intending to marry notified the church leader three months in advance to enable them publicly to announce this intention at both the man and the woman's local churches. After the dowry was fully paid, the faithful gathered at the man's home for celebrations and prayers to welcome the woman.

The Europeans abhorred the levirate. It offended the church's laws as to the degrees of relationship within which marriage might take place. 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. 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 the retention of the levirate and claimed a biblical basis for it (cf Genesis 38; Deuteronomy 25: 5-10; Ruth 4). The leviratic union therefore finds a close parallel in the Old Testament. It was on this type of marriage that Jews based their approach to polygamy. The widow was cared for in some ways by this arrangement. This practice persisted throughout the colonial period.

Handling of the dead and deceased was a big issue to the church because of the way the Luo celebrate death. When an adherent died, they actively participated in the celebrations, ceremonies and burial. Seventy very many years.
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 70 days, all that pertains to burial should have been appropriately handled to release the spirit to rest in peace. Henceforth if the dead were a man then his wife/wives was/were free to pick a levir.

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. Luo religious concepts and practices were accorded a Judeo-Christian and sometimes Islamic re-interpretation. This kind of re-interpretation seemed acceptable within the changing circumstances.

This movement also met a need in a society disturbed by the impact of colonialism. 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, in spite of the warning by the Provincial Commissioner, Mr. John Ainsworth that:

All 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 viable alternative community to replace the lost solidarity of the society. By introducing the new movement Dwalo was providing a home, a community, for those experiencing the disruption. The First World War enhanced the disruption of the existing patterns even further and therefore those who joined the NLC found it accommodating.\(^{20}\)

Dwalo’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

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\(^{20}\) The First World War was very destructive to the society in terms of the manpower that had to leave the area many of whom never returned after the war. The women, children and the old who were left had to contribute towards the war effort by increased production of crops and sale of their animals.
perceived. The important element was the role of the prophet in relation to
the movement of which he was the founder. 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 the Jews
and Arabs, because, henceforth, they also possessed in him a 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. The relations of Owalo and the people, on one side
were, 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 revelation, which continued throughout his career as a prophet. In other
words, a direct communication with God was the source of the movement's
dynamism and without it the church would have diminished or simply
stagnated. The charisma in Owalo, which was associated closely with the
divine revelation, made him one to 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, and 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 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 marital 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 marital 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. One Yona Oyungu, who often interacted with women, had the curse of wondering slapped on him by Owalo.\textsuperscript{21} In spite of this, women still formed the majority of his members.

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 \textit{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 legitimate 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. She 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

\textsuperscript{21} Oral interview with Lois Otinda at Ralingo on the 13\textsuperscript{th} January, 1980.
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 culture change. Barrett (1968:147) remarks:

\[\text{The missionary assault on the family complex caused women to act, for they felt the issues at stake more keenly than the men. With more to lose, they vehemently defended their traditional institutions and way of life.}\]

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 the Luo leadership pattern and the Christian one. The church was his ethnic 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 inquired 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 because 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 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 1981:166). 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 Allia 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 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 shamfilm (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 church finances. This was the pattern of leadership until 1972 when the whole hierarchy was revised and made even more elaborate.

In the NLC titles, marital 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 (Caulfield 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 domination, 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 sharriff (the circumciser). But it should be noted that during circumcision an elderly woman was present with the sharriff and the pastor. All of these participants had to undergo 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 occasions 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 neighbourhood 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 a 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 meant the woman’s social strength and power rested 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 and hence purification. During 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 female sexuality and use 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 (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.22

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

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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 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 was denied women whenever men were present at a ritual of events, Luo women show respect

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23 For details on the incidences of crisis in the church see Opwapo 1981, chapter five. In 1967 Owigo quitted and formed his Holy Ghost Coptic Church. However, he still left with individual mostly women who had received Muya (Holy Spirit – the ability to operate in the Spirit and perform miracles of all sorts).
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 decisions 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 were 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 mainline 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 ceremonial 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 semi-literate. 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 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 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 new theology of family life. There is need for both men and women 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. 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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