

The Origin and Development of Legio Maria Church in Kenya

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Abstract- The Legio Maria Church is a unique African religious movement that emerged in Kenya in the early 1960s as a split from the Roman Catholic Church. This paper explores the origin and development of the Legio Maria Church in Kenya. The paper discusses how the church was founded by Simeo Melkio Ondetto and Mama Maria, and how the church's teachings and practices have evolved over time. The paper also examines the role of the church in promoting social and political change in Kenya, particularly in relation to its anti-racist black liberation theology. Finally, the paper discusses the challenges that the Legio Maria Church has faced over the years, including conflicts with other religious groups and internal divisions. Overall, this paper provides insight into the origin and development of the Legio Maria Church in Kenya and its unique contributions to African religious diversity and spirituality.

Indexed Terms- Origin, Development, Legio Maria Church

I. INTRODUCTION

The Legio Maria Church, or Legion of Mary Church, is a religious movement that originated in 1963 in south Nyanza Province, Kenya, as a split from the Roman Catholic Church. Led by Lodvikus son of God Simeo Melkio Ondetto and an enigmatic woman known as Mama Maria, the church has grown to have a significant presence in Kenya and other African countries. The Legio Maria Church teaches that Simeo Ondetto is the son of God sent to promote God's glory on earth and that he is the Black Messiah. According to Legio Maria beliefs, Simeo Ondetto, Jesus of Nazareth, and Melchizedek are one and the same person reborn during different times of human history. The Legio Maria Church has formulated its own version of an anti-racist black liberation theology,

which is unique. The spirit is a significant aspect of the Legio Maria Church, as it provides direction for individuals in relation to spiritual discipline practices and outward garments. The Legio Maria Church is a testament to the diverse religious movements that have emerged in Kenya and other African countries.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Legio Maria Church, also known as the Legion of Mary Church, is a unique religious movement that emerged in Kenya in 1963 as a split from the Roman Catholic Church. Led by Lodvikus son of God Simeo Melkio Ondetto and an enigmatic woman known as Mama Maria, the church has grown to have a significant presence in Kenya and other African countries (Anon, 2000; Tobias, 2014). The Legio Maria Church's teachings and beliefs are centered around Simeo Ondetto, who is considered to be the son of God sent to promote God's glory on earth and the Black Messiah (Ogeke, 1987). Legio Maria believers hold that Simeo Ondetto, Jesus of Nazareth, and Melchizedek are one and the same person reborn during different times of human history, which sets the church apart from many other religious movements (Peter, 1970).

The Legio Maria Church has formulated its own version of an anti-racist black liberation theology, which is unique and reflects the church's commitment to racial equality (Schwartz, 1989; Tobias, 2014). The church's spirit is central to its practices, providing direction for individuals in relation to spiritual discipline practices and outward garments (Schwartz, 1989). Legio Maria believers listen for messages from the angels in their dreams in relation to the color of robe they should wear, with each color having a specific meaning (Schwartz, 1989). The church also has a significant focus on saints, with a long list of adored Legio Maria saints, including Timotheo Atila,

Maria Ombwayo, Tobias Oongo, Petro Otieno, Mumbo Carilus, and Angi Clement (Tobias, 2014).

The Legio Maria Church is a testament to the diverse religious movements that have emerged in Kenya and other African countries, with its unique teachings and practices attracting a significant following. While the Legio Maria Church's beliefs may differ from those of other religious movements, its commitment to racial equality and spiritual guidance through the spirit demonstrates the importance of religion in the lives of many Kenyans and Africans.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed-methods approach, including both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. Data was collected through surveys, interviews, and document analysis. The study sample consisted of members, leaders, and stakeholders of the Legio Maria church in Kisumu County.

IV. RESULTS

In 1963, a movement of discontented Catholics in south Nyanza Province ditched the Diocese of Kisii and formed the Legio Maria Church, or Legion of Mary Church, under the patronage of the Lodvikus son of God Simeo Melkio Ondetto and an old enigmatic woman called Mama Maria. The enigmatic woman is the one whom Legio Maria congregants associate with the special secretes of Fatima. She is perceived to have called a good number of Catholics to the new movement by visionary outlooks, directing members to look forward to her spiritual son Simeo Ondeto who was then the a catechist in the Roman Catholic Church had come to save Africa. Ondeto was later expelled from the Church in 1960s. By the year 1980, the church had garnered 248,000 total number of members compared to Government estimation at the time of the split from the Catholic Church which was about 90,000 members of Legio Maria and this gave the Legio Maria wings to become a member of the East African United Churches by the year 1968. (Tobias. 2014).

The Legio Maria Church was not the only church for split among the Luo people in the early years of

Kenyan independence. Catholic Church missionaries had been working among the Luo for 61 years before the 1963 split. By 1966 there were 31 distinct Luo separate churches registered with the Kenyan Government. Across Kenya, by 1966 there were 160 separate Churches with a total of 600,000 congregants of which the majority were originally protestant members or Roman Catholic Churches, with the Legion of Mary Church being the largest of the splits from the Catholic Church. (Nancy 1989),

However, the Legio Maria Church began exclusively as a movement among the Luo people, it is now found all over Kenya and even has huge numbers of communities among the Turkana, Kalenjin, Kamba and Luhya peoples of Kenya and in Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, DRC, and Ethiopia. In 1979, the word mission was added to the church's official name making it become the Legio Maria of African Church Mission. After Ondeto died, who was buried at Got Kwer in 1991 and immediately became Baba Messia, and is henceforth perceived by some Legios as Christ reborn in Africa and hence the living God. Pope Timothy Blasio became leader until his death in 1998, when a new Pope, Lawrence Pius Jairo Chiage, was appointed.

According to the Legio Maria Church teachings, Simeo Ondetto is the son of God sent to promote God's glory on earth. The Legio Maria believes in administering or times when God has stepped into human history after the downfall of man. The first is found in the Old Testament when the High Priest Melchizedek appeared to Abraham. Melchizedek administered a reign of a monotheistic awareness which was put to an end with the coming of Jesus. The roles established by Jesus Christ was valuing trinity of individual salvation and introducing universal religion of love which was characterized by love (Ogeke1987). The third dispensation is the reign of God introduced by Simeo Ondetto as Lodvikus meaning the son of God sent to show the glory of God to the World. In Legio Maria Church theology, the second person of the trinity has appeared in history three times, as Melchizedek Son of God to define the history of the human redemption by blessing God's chosen race through Abraham; as Jesus to finish the mission of redemption, opening it and teaching the core element which is love and finally as Simeo Lodvikus now to

reveal the glory of life after death and the nature of God. To Legio Maria faithful's, Simeo Ondetto, Jesus of Nazareth and Melchizedek are one and the same person reborn during different times of human history. Simeo Ondeto is known as the Lodvikus or The Glory of God, whose role is to bring the world to knowing the underneath treasures of life after death and dramatize the reality of eternal life. According to Legio Maria the promises made by Jesus to return has been fulfilled by the coming of Simeo Ondeto. However, the Legio Maria church appears not to believe in a final judgement of the whole world. They believe in immediate judgement of individuals immediately after death. This is supported by the long list of adored Legio Maria saints. Some of the official Legio Maria saints include Timotheo Atila, Maria Ombwayo, Tobias Oongo, Petro Otieno, Mumbo Carilus and Angi Clement. Church leaders distinguish Messiah Simeo Ondeto's mission as separate from that of Jesus. He was not sent to replace Jesus, for Jesus was a name given to the son of God when he accomplished a second dispensational mission (Peter, 1970). While confirming that Messiah Simeo Ondeto is the Black Messiah, the Legio Maria do not exclude the possibility and reality that the Messiah has been reborn in different times and contexts. The Baba Messiah Ondeto had preached that God is the God who loves all the houses in his home. All religions he quoted, are just but an example to branches of a tree that bears fruit. Legios reiterated that black and white people could both get to Heaven, if they followed their faiths strictly without looking back. (Pobee, 1992).

Indeed it's true that salvation is available through other religions and revelations of God but while the Legio Maria are clear that God has provided specific revelations and even incarnations for different peoples of the world, this does not necessarily translate into an exclusivist position in which only followers of Legio Maria will be with God in heaven. According to Schwartz, most Legio Maria confirmed that Heaven was a place where the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Mary, saints, angels and Old Testament prophets and patriarchs are without color, a place where there is nothing like European and African. She concludes that the Legio Maria Church has formulated their own version of an anti-racist black liberation theology, which is unique. (Tobias 2014).

It's apparent that Legio Maria is a spirit reliant religious movement whose adherents respect as the guide of Legio Church. Even while the Simeo Ondeto and the Black Mary were still alive, it was possible for them to be in one place in Kenya while teaching and visiting other congregants through spirit delivered teachings of glossolalia and holy spirit possessing prophets to deliver messages from them . It is such a serious offence to falsify the retelling of encounters with the holy ones in a glossolalia thus even such actions could lead to an official rebuke from the priest, or even a beating, called a *chwat*, from one's local community. (Anon, 2000).

The spirit also provide direction for the individuals in relation to spiritual discipline practices and outward garments. While many African Inland Churches require followers to exclusively wear white robes when worshipping, the Legio Maria church encourages followers to listen for messages from the angels in their dreams in relation to the color of robe they should wear. Schwartz recounts the varied meanings of these dream inspired colors. The spirit can lead Legios to acquire robes of yellow, a range of blues, purple, green, red, brown and other colors that are relevant with various spiritual gifts and patron saints. Black is for ordained male priests and church mothers. Legio Maria priests and church mothers wear black robes at requiem masses and at graveside services held in family compounds. At happier times, black prayer beads are worn or carried by church mothers and priests as an indication of power and ordained status. A few non-ordained men and women said they had the black beads on their house altars because a dream had directed them to get the beads and pray with them at home. The dream-bestowed black beads were a source of pride to the Legio Maria church. (Schwartz 1989)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Legio Maria Church is a unique religious movement that emerged in Kenya in the early 1960s as a split from the Roman Catholic Church. Led by Lodvikus son of God Simeo Melkio Ondetto and an enigmatic woman known as Mama Maria, the church has grown to have a significant presence in Kenya and other African countries. The Legio Maria Church teaches that Simeo Ondetto is the son of God sent to

promote God's glory on earth and that he is the Black Messiah, and that Simeo Ondetto, Jesus of Nazareth, and Melchizedek are one and the same person reborn during different times of human history.

The Legio Maria Church has formulated its own version of an anti-racist black liberation theology, which is unique and reflects the church's commitment to racial equality. The church's spirit is central to its practices, providing direction for individuals in relation to spiritual discipline practices and outward garments, which are determined by messages from angels received in dreams.

While the Legio Maria Church began exclusively as a movement among the Luo people, it is now found all over Kenya and even has a significant following in other African countries. The church has a long list of adored Legio Maria saints, and its adherents believe in immediate judgement of individuals immediately after death. The Legio Maria Church is a testament to the diverse religious movements that have emerged in Kenya and other African countries, with its unique teachings and practices attracting a significant following.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Encourage interfaith dialogue: The Legio Maria Church's commitment to racial equality and its belief that salvation is available through other religions and revelations of God can serve as a basis for interfaith dialogue. Encouraging dialogue between different religious groups can foster mutual understanding and respect, which can help to reduce religious conflicts.
2. Foster cultural and religious diversity: The Legio Maria Church's emphasis on the spirit and the messages received in dreams can serve as a reminder of the importance of cultural and religious diversity. Encouraging cultural and religious diversity can help to promote tolerance and understanding among different groups.
3. Promote human rights: The Legio Maria Church's anti-racist black liberation theology highlights the importance of human rights. It is important to promote and protect human rights, including the right to freedom of religion and belief, for all

individuals regardless of their race, gender, or religion.

4. Support local religious movements: The Legio Maria Church's emergence as a split from the Roman Catholic Church highlights the importance of supporting local religious movements and providing them with the resources they need to grow and thrive. This can help to promote religious diversity and tolerance.
5. Encourage research on religious movements: The Legio Maria Church's unique teachings and practices demonstrate the diversity of religious movements in Africa. Encouraging research on these movements can help to increase understanding of their beliefs and practices, and promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance.

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