

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LEGIO MARIA

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## Introduction

The Legio Maria movement is the largest African-initiated church to have broken from Catholicism in Africa. It is an offshoot of the Legion of Mary, a Catholic lay organisation from Ireland, established in Kenya in 1936. The movement's leaders use the name "Maria Legio" rather than the actual name "Legio Maria" (Dirven, "Protest", p. 127 n. 1). In terms of composition, Barrett notes:

A survey in 1969 showed that 10% of the members had formerly been Roman Catholics in good standing, 10% former Protestants, about 40% lapsed, nominal or would-be Catholics, and about 40% were pagans before joining. Ondeto is recognised as the spiritual head, Baba Mtakatifu, the special representative of Jesus Christ, with Pope Atila as second-in-command. . . . The church combines Luo tradition and culture with conservative Roman Catholicism including retention of Latin in the mass. (Barrett, *Handbook*, pp. 246-7).

The Legio Maria are widespread in the regions of Eastern Africa, though mainly among the Luo or people which have affinity with the Luo. Because of the predominance of Luo leadership, culture, and customs, it seems unlikely that they will gain significant numbers of non-Luo members in the future (Dirven, "Maria", p. 200). In 1980, there were an estimated 150,000 members (Barrett, *Encyclopedia*, p. 436).

The members of the Legio Maria claim to be the followers of the African Messiah who has come to help his people, and to deliver them from oppression, suffering, and the white man's domination. They also believe that Jesus Christ came to the white people in the first place, but in these last days He has chosen to appear in the form of a Black African to save the Africans also. There are three major figures in this cult: Simeon Ondeto (Silvius Maussius Ondeto—popularly called "Savior Messiah Holy Father"); Mama Regina Owitch, and Gaudencia Aoko. Their headquarters are situated in the South Nyanza Province of Kenya, at a place they call Got Kwer ("The Mount of Atonement").

### The Birth of the Legio Maria

#### *Important Contextual Factors*

Four important factors which led to the rise and development of Legio Maria must be noted (Dirven, "Maria", pp. 107-35):

1. The Catholic Church grew too fast to ensure adequate pastoral supervision. Probably as a result of easy baptisms, and typical of many early missions, a traditional "core" remained under a newly-acquired Catholic veneer. Surface allegiance had changed, but the core worldview remained the same. Compounding this, the area in which the Legio Maria arose is very rural, less densely populated, and poorly developed.
2. Among many Kenyan Catholic adherents there was a particular attraction to devotion to Mary. Further, the local Legion of Mary, a recognised lay apostolate movement, had significant deviations from its established order, including inappropriate terminology, the wearing of colorful clothing as a distinctive "uniform", and excessive visitation of the sick to pray for healing.
3. There was a great fascination with the concept of Uhuru (Swahili for "freedom"). Kenya was in process of realizing and enjoying its independence, and many suspected that even the white missionaries were racist. In addition, two small separatist movements may have provided models for Legio Maria to follow, though they are not actually linked to the rise of the Legio Maria. Further, there were several local Protestant breakaway groups in Nyanza province which provided models for independence. These groups were not real threats to the Catholic adherents, because Catholics tend towards an aversion of joining a group that looks too "Protestant". Thus, though they provided models of independence, they were not the type of group towards which a typical Catholic would gravitate.
4. Finally, in the midst of all of this, two charismatic Catholic leaders, Ondeto and the key female figure, were able to join forces and ideas.

#### *A Confusion of Identity*

Establishing the identity of the chief female founder of the movement is not as easy as one would hope. Peter Dirven wrote his doctoral thesis on the movement in 1969. In it he extensively examined the historical factors and early characters. He gives significant coverage to the role Gaudencia Aoko played in founding the movement. Today's adherents, however, assign that role to Regina Owitch, referring to her as "Virgin Mary" (Bikra Maria) and the mother of Ondeto. In the literature, Barrett, writing in the early 1970s, is the first to give the place of prominence to Owitch. To our knowledge, he does not even mention Aoko. Dirven, as noted, gives Aoko the primary female role, and does not mention Owitch, thus leaving confusion in the literature on Legio

**Maria regarding the identity of the primary female founder. How did this discrepancy arise, and what is its solution? We need to examine each person in turn in order to propose an answer.**

*Simeon Ondeto*

Stories and legends surrounding the birth and early life of Simeon Ondeto abound. For example, Francis Joseph Jannes Ojimo, a deacon of Legio Maria, Kadem Mission South Nyanza, says,

Around 1960, 'Baba Messias' was going round in the African countries, to help the people of Africa who were in many problems, including political oppression by the colonist whites. He appeared to different people at different places in different forms. Nobody could recognize him as the *one* (Ojimo interview).

Another follower of Legio Maria in Nairobi, Teresa Aoko, relates:

In fact, in Kenya he appeared as Dedan Kimathi. [Dedan Kimathi was a Kikuyu freedom fighter in Kenya who was caught and hung by the colonial government]. Nobody knows where he was buried. When the whites caught him, they were not able to kill him. He disappeared from them. He is the very one. The pictures of the two resemble (Aoko interview).

Finally, Ondeto himself is said to have claimed:

I was born on the first day, and first date of the first month of the first year at the first hour. I want to pray for the sick. That is why I came, others are suffering in their homes but have no money to go to hospital; they die because of Satan who has bound them. I have come so that people may be saved from the bondage of Satan (Ojimo interview).

The story goes that 'Ondeto' had appeared as a small boy in the home of an elder Obimbo Joseph Musumba, in Agoro Kisumu District. The boy grew up in the home of Obimbo Musumba. He became a shepherd boy. It is claimed that Obimbo testified to the police: "This man came to me as a small boy. He was just scratching his feet (in Luo "ndeto") so I called him 'Ondeto', but I am not his father" (Ojimo interview). It is further claimed that Ondeto performed miracles even when he was a shepherd boy. Francis Ojimo tells Obimbo's story:

As a shepherd boy, he moulded clay into small animals and the clay animals became live animals before the other children, and destroyed the clay animals of the other children. The children reported to Obimbo who hid himself to find out the truth. Obimbo saw and

believed. In fact the boy did other miracles; he could hide himself and start to conduct a service with heavenly angels descending for worship. Obimbo discovered him again. He saw him in changed clothes, a big table, candles lit brightly, and many beautiful angels worshipping. Then the candles, clothes, angels, and table disappeared. And I asked him "Are you really human? Why are your actions different from ours?" Then he answered, "Where I came from you know not, whence I go you will not know" (Ojimo interview).

Simeon Ondeto joined the local Legion of Mary and began preaching. He was a good preacher who held his audience captive. Eventually, however, in his sermons he began to relate visions he had experienced:

In one of his sermons on the sufferings of Christ he claimed that he had died twice and had seen heaven: there were no members of other religions in heaven, only Catholics; nor were there any priests, with the exception of Bishop Brandsma and Father Bouma; yet Jacob, David and Abraham were there, enjoying polygamy in heaven as they had done on earth and telling Simeon that polygamists should be baptised.

Simeon did not limit himself to preaching. Whereas at first he had gone around the villages with the Legionnaires to exorcise evil spirits and to pray for the sick, asking for food in return for his favours, he now began to baptise, and called himself a 'Jahulo' (the one who announces, the prophet) (Dirven, "Maria", p. 124).

Ondeto is said to have performed other miracles too, after he became the leader of Legio Maria (he reportedly raised Gaudencia Aoko from the dead, was able to change his appearance, escaped from locked prison doors, etc.).

Ondeto moved from Agoro, in Kisumu District and went to Suna, in South Nyanza. He climbed a small hill, now called Got Kwer, though sometimes referred to as 'Got Kalvary'. There he made his headquarters. The whole village, including the Got Kwer, is called "Jerusalem". It is here that he and a lady met in 1963 to found the Legio Maria. As to who the lady was, there are two proposals (as already noted). According to present adherents (and, apparently, Barrett), Silvius Maussius Ondeto (the "Son") met with Bikra Maria Regina Owitch, or Mary. According to Dirven, Ondeto met Gaudencia Aoko. A review of the evidence indicates that the latter is most certainly the correct historical account.

#### *Gaudencia Aoko*

The regard people have for Gaudencia Aoko depends on which part of Nyanza province they come from. Some claim that she alone was the actual founder of the group, while others give her only prominence as a successful prophetess

and claim that she was brought back to life after she had died for a few days by Ondeto, though Aoko herself denies that she was ever resurrected (Dirven, "Maria", p. 126 n. 37). Her own visions rivaled those of Ondeto, as Dirven reports:

According to her own account Jesus and Mary appeared to her one night at 2.00 a.m., instructing her to start a religion and to call it Legio Maria. More visions followed: in one of them she was told to go outside and she saw Christ standing on a stone pointing his hands upwards to heaven; in another vision Christ told her that he would give her six books. Two days later Our Lady asked her to teach the people, and she even gave a sign; she told Gaudencia to touch the wounded leg of a man so that it would be healed; Gaudencia did, and the leg was healed. (Dirven, "Maria", p. 125).

Aoko's visions scratched a cultural "itch" and won many to the movement. Aoko, as the recipient of the visions, was held in unparalleled admiration among the Luo (Dirven, "Protest", p. 129). In fact, the actions of Aoko had such tremendous cultural and personal appeal that many of the early Legio Maria adherents unashamedly called themselves Aoko's followers (Kaufmann, p. 2).

Officially, by the middle of 1964, Aoko was recognized as the second in command after Ondeto. The *Reporter* of 17 July 1964 states:

A few days . . . [after the imprisonment of Ondeto], Kenya's nationwide ban on public meetings was lifted, and Simeon's second-in-command and the sect's biggest crowd puller is now operating unhampered. She is an impish 21 year old, beautiful Luo girl named Gaudencia Aoko (p. 17).

Interestingly enough, Aoko's husband, Simeo Owiti, was then the number three in the Legio Maria hierarchy (*Ibid.*, p. 18). One important clue to solving the puzzle of who co-founded the movement is the fact that Regina Owitch is not mentioned anywhere in the *Reporter* article or in any other pre-1969 account of the movement that we have been able to locate.

Another clue is the official position she occupied early in the movement's history. The general practice of African-initiated church movements is that those who played key roles in the founding of the group are given the top positions in its hierarchy. With the husband and wife team occupying the number two and three positions, it is obvious that they were recognized by Ondeto as instrumental in the founding of the Legio Maria. Thus, Aoko's role in the early history of the Legio Maria is well-established. What, then are we to do with the claims of present adherents (and Barrett) that it was Owitch who was the prominent female in the founding of the group?

*Regina Owitch (Bikra Maria)*

Regina Owitch, like Gaudencia Aoko, is something of a household name among the Legio Maria faithful. The idea that she co-founded the movement with Ondeto, however, needs careful consideration, especially since Dirven does not mention Owitch at all in his dissertation. In any event, Owitch served as a prophetess until she died in 1966. We will say more about her current status in the movement after examining the historical birth of the Legio Maria.

*Ondeto Meets Aoko*

Again, there are two differing accounts of the actual founding of the Legio Maria. According to many current adherents, "Holy Father" Ondeto met "Mary" Owitch in 1963 and this was the time of the actual founding of the movement. Theresa Aoko explains this version:

Mother and son met at 'Got Kalvari' in Suna, Migori; and when they greeted one another, the power of God fell on all the people who had been recruited by Ondeto. All people fell down. The people heard the voices of angels singing wonderful songs. When they got up, they were speaking in tongues of Latin. From that time people were given different powers, gifts and works of the Holy Spirit. Many Catholic Fathers know that Baba [Ondeto] is the one; but if they publicize it, they will be excommunicated and their support from abroad will be cut. The Catholics had God's power indeed, but had hidden it from Africans; but when Baba Messiah came, he poured the power to the Africans and even the Pope is not happy (Aoko interview).

In the *Kenya Churches Handbook*, Barrett appears to confirm that Maria and Ondeto were the co-founders of the movement:

From 1930-60, an unmarried Luo Roman Catholic mystic named Maria (born circa 1876, died 1966) saw visions calling her to initiate an African Catholic church. After several abortive attempts, a mass exodus of Luo and Kisii Catholics took place from the RC Diocese of Kisii in 1960-62, and with her spiritual son Simeo Ondeto, Maria founded the Legion of Mary Church, initially with some 90,000 adherents. After a period of turbulence during which Ondeto was briefly imprisoned, the church was granted registration and organised itself throughout Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania (North Mara District) (Barrett, *Handbook*, p. 246).

Dirven however, basing himself on extensive interviews and working closer to the time of the founding of the movement, states that it was Gaudencia Aoko (not Regina Owitch) who visited Simeon and stayed with him for one month (in April of 1963). This he confirmed through personal interviews of Aoko

herself. Her own account is that she went to test his claims of dying twice and coming back to life. Dirven notes:

It is difficult to ascertain what took place during the month that Gaudencia spent at Simeon's home. At any rate, the importance of this meeting of somewhat kindred spirits is that it heralded the birth of the Legio Maria which soon afterwards began to spread among the Luo of Nyanza (Dirven, "Maria", p. 127).

#### *Solving the Puzzle*

Today, the Legio Maria adherents assume without question that the "Maria" named by Barrett is the mother of Ondeto and the co-founder of the movement. In seeking a solution to this puzzle, we must note that Barrett wrote his material in the early 1970s. In late 1968 however, just before Dirven wrote his dissertation, a sharp disagreement arose between Ondeto and Aoko. This disagreement was so sharp that eventually Aoko's role was reduced from "Holy Mother" and "Auxiliary Spiritual Leader" to that of "Sister General", whose exclusive role was evangelism (Dirven, "Maria", p. 207). It seems likely that by the time Barrett was doing his research, Aoko's role in the founding of Legio Maria was no longer acknowledged, possibly to prevent her gaining prominence over Ondeto. The stories had changed so that it was no longer she who met Ondeto, but Regina Owitch—the grand old lady upon whom the title (which is a title rather than her actual name) of "Bikra Maria" had been conferred—even though she was already dead.

But why this switch? While alive, Owitch had achieved the status of prophetess for the movement. Theresa Aoko relates the current view, "When she was asked 'Where are you from?'; she replied, 'I came in this world a long time ago. I am looking for my son who got lost.'" (Aoko interview). It is also said that she was helped by Michael the angel while she ministered on earth (Aoko interview). Among the Luo, the rise of an elderly prophetess to herald glad tidings or an imminent cataclysm employing this very formula has cultural precedents. Two Luo narratives illustrate this point.

The first narrative concerns Nyamgondho wuod Ombare, a poor fisherman who became rich overnight because he heeded Nyar Nam, a very old prophetess. The moment he dismissed Nyar Nam, he lost all his wealth (Odaga, "Fisherman", pp. 7-11). The second narrative is about Simbi, the legendary village which was swept away by floods. Everyone drowned except one village woman and her children. The land, we are told, flooded because the inhabitants disregarded the prophecy of a strange old woman (Odaga, "Simbi", pp. 133-36).

Historically, then, it appears that Owitch was an elderly Luo prophetess who prophesied sometime between the founding of the Legio Maria and 1966 when she died. She heralded a message which contributed greatly to the popularity

of the Legio Maria, though she did not play as prominent a role as Aoko did. Nevertheless, as many did not want to fail to heed the lesson of the traditional stories, they listened to her. However, there is no historical evidence that she played the crucial role now attributed to her in the founding of the Legio Maria.

After the falling out between Aoko and Ondeto, there arose a cultural vacuum. Further, about this time Ondeto elevated his own status from Pope to that of African Messiah (or Christ). For continuing cultural (Luo) legitimization of the movement, and confirmation of Ondeto's new status, an elderly prophetess was needed. She would need to be seen as having played a significant role in the founding of the movement, and her prophecies would have to confirm Ondeto's claims. In the oral history of the Legio Maria, then, Owitch was elevated to this role, apparently sometime between Dirven's dissertation and Barrett's writing. Not only was she an elderly woman and a prophetess, but (perhaps just as important) she was also dead, and therefore posed no rivalry to Ondeto's position as the head of the church. This appears to explain satisfactorily the discrepancy between the earlier accounts (including Dirven) and the ones given today by the adherents (and Barrett).

#### Teachings of the Legio Maria

As with many of the African independent churches, the Legio Maria do not possess an official written doctrinal statement. Much of the doctrine is to be found in the sermons and lives of the adherents. Dirven explains:

The Maria Legio does not possess an explicitly formulated creed or a systematic treatise of doctrine. It may in fact be asserted that in a vague and implicit way the movement accepts whatever Catholics hold with the exception of the Pope in Rome, who has been replaced by founder Simeon Ondeto ("Maria", pp. 220-1).

In this section, we will give an overview of the teachings of the Legio Maria as noted from interviews and written sources. The Protestant reader is advised to bear in mind the Catholic nature of the group, especially concerning the doctrine of Mary.

#### *Ondeto*

Ondeto claims that he is the Messiah of the Whites but now has come to the Blacks. He has even gone as far as claiming himself to be Christ, and his adherents have accepted this as authoritative. Dirven feels that in calling himself Christ, he is more likely expressing that he is a saviour and embodies the saving power of Christ, not that he is a replacement for Christ:

To Simeon and his followers it may mean probably nothing more than that he symbolises in a visible way the invisible Christ, somewhat



similar to the Pope being the 'Vicar of Christ' and the priest being called an alter Christus (Dirven, "Maria", p. 222).

Even if Dirven is right about Ondeto's self-perception, the fact that he claims to be Christ has no biblical foundation or precedent and can only lead to confusion in the minds of the followers. As Wagner points out:

[Archbishop Herbert] Aloo and others even call Baba Simeon "Jesus" because through him they were saved, not only from disease, but from drunkenness, fighting, and a degraded life. They have no apparent theological problem with an overidentification of their leader with the Messiah (Wagner, p. 11).

In reality, the Legio Maria, in a way, serve Ondeto. They put on the cheapest clothes and are expected to send money in to their headquarters at "Jerusalem" to help promote God's work. Ondeto himself, however, drives in a Mercedes Benz and enjoys the benefits of the toil of his servant-followers.

### *Salvation*

Among the Legio Maria, salvation is usually linked more to life in the here and now than to the afterlife in heaven or hell (Dirven, "Maria", p. 222). Relating to being "saved", a term used widely in the East African revival movement, Theresa Aoko states:

We Legios do not claim that we are saved, because no one can be saved here on earth. A person who is saved has a heart like that of a small child; which is impossible for a mature person to have. Adults are apt to make mistakes all the time. We are sinners all the time, and we need forgiveness every time which we can get as we pray (Aoko interview).

She also explains that a Legio overcomes sin "only through prayers, more rosaries, and more fasting". She also notes, "It is better to pass through the cross while still alive [a religious function carried out by the Legios at their shrines]. This then sets the believer free from the offenses he committed. When he dies he will be looked upon favorably" (Aoko interview).

### *Mary*

At the time of Dirven's dissertation, and from his perspective, the movement appeared proper and in order in its allegiance to Mary. He notes with approval:

Loyal to its name and origin the Maria Legio fosters a great devotion to Our Lady, as is externally manifested by the display of numerous multi-coloured rosaries of all sizes and shapes and by the pictures in

chapels and homes. When the visitor enters a Maria Legio shrine, he is first led—after taking off his shoes, depositing his cigarettes, and genuflecting before a large cross—to the prayer chapel where he is invited to join in saying the Hail Mary (Dirven, “Maria”, p. 226).

Since Dirven has written, however, Regina Owitch has been elevated to the status of Bikra Maria, which would no longer fit the Catholic framework. In any event, the prominence given to the person of Mary and to the teachings about Mary does not accord with a biblical pattern.

### *Eschatology*

As with soteriology, the eschatology of the Legio Maria is primarily focused on this world (salvation from disease, fear, insecurity, and poverty). They do have apocalyptic ideas, however. These seem to some extent to be influenced by Seventh Day Adventists, who are also prominent in the area. Among their ideas is the concept of a heaven which holds promise of human pleasures, seen for example in Simeon’s vision of the OT leaders enjoying polygamy in heaven (Dirven, “Maria”, pp. 230-1). As with many such groups, there have been predictions of the end to come which have failed to materialise:

In December 1964 Maria Legio followers in Central Nyanza expected the imminent end of the world, and when the rumour was spread that the date of the cataclysm was going to be December 12—the first anniversary of Kenya’s independence—Mr. Odinga had to reassure them that nothing of the sort would happen (Dirven, “Maria”, p. 231).

### *Prayer*

Probably the best known emphasis of the movement is its prayer. Followers will travel hours to pray for hours. Dirven notes:

Prayer, public and private, is one of the outstanding features of the movement. The hours spent in prayer or in travelling to the sick and to prayer-meetings, and the reliance on prayer almost to the exclusion of natural means such as work, medicine and education have been a matter of grave concern for Administration officials, anxious as they are to have their development plans implemented by the participation and cooperation of all in the hard work required (Dirven, “Maria”, p. 252).

The Legio Maria also incorporate some of the Roman Catholic teachings in their faith and pray through the help of saints and angels. As Teresa Aoko says,

Every old saint in heaven and angel has a special role and task; so that when a Legio Maria follower calls any by name, in prayer, that saint

or angel responds to help in time of need. For example Michael the angel of war will respond to help fight demons attacking any Legio follower who calls (Aoko interview).

This prayer often is for the sick or demonised. The Legio Maria generally feel that all who are sick are so because of demons (who may be ancestral spirits). This is little more than a revival of Luo "Mumboism", a belief that spirit possessions are always preceded by illnesses which come from a spirit named Mumbo (see Kombo, p. 1, and Ogot, pp. 78-9). While not necessarily "orthodox" in Luo traditional terms, this opens the doors for the anti-witchdoctor stance of the Legio Maria.

How do they confront the demonic forces which bring sickness? Donald Jacobs explains their attitude and ritual for exorcism:

The Legion of Mary... is rather typical of the confrontationists. They exorcise in the following manner. The community gathers around the person who is possessed and who is now the object of the exorcism. They require that the person bring all medicines, amulets and other objects which he used in occult practices. These are then burned in the presence of the one to be exorcised while the community of faith kneel and recite the rosary and the Catena. While in prayer, the priests pass a rosary over various parts of the body of the possessed. The possessed then goes into convulsions and begins to speak in tongues. The officials rebuke the spirit and order it out of the person. Dialogue with the spirit or spirits ensues until as a result of communal prayer the spirit announces its departure. If a spectator also trembles and begins to speak in tongues during the rite, he, too, is exorcised. If the spirit returns to someone already exorcised, the person, in order to maintain a resistance to the threatening spirit, is required to join the healers and the exorcists and help others who are sick and possessed. If possession persists, it could indicate that a sick person is living in a demon-infested situation. The solution is to move away (Jacobs, p. 182).

Kombo points out some important details of exorcism missed by Jacobs:

They do not do any preparation prior to exorcism. No steps are taken to ascertain the actual possession by demons; it is simply assumed that all non-Legios are possessed. In the process, the name of Jesus is mysteriously omitted and where it is mentioned it almost always refers to Baba Messias. No confession of sin is required, and no prayer is made for God to fill the person with the power and the protection of the Holy Spirit (Kombo, p. 4).

### *Clothing*

Another well known distinctive of the Legio Maria is their colorful clothing. Every Legio adherent wears clothing of a particular colour (or colours) to identify himself or herself with certain saints and/or angels. The colours indicate a function in the church and/or that a particular "angel" has appeared to the adherent and offers protection. This angel's or saint's protection is invoked and acknowledged publicly by the actual wearing of the colour. For example, a Legio Maria in a red cloak is an exorcist of the order of Michael or Gabriel, and a woman in purple clothing is the Legio Maria equivalent of a Catholic nun.

### *Death*

The Legio adherents have a peculiar mix of Catholic and syncretistic teachings about death and the afterlife. Aoko states:

Abraham our grandfather is in charge of all inspections of the dead. Whosoever dies all over the world, must pass through "Got Kalvari" in South Nyanza Kenya to be inspected by Abraham. Each soul is checked and assigned its respective place according to the kind of life the person led on earth. Others go to purgatory, others to hell, and others to heaven. We the Legio Maria can pray to God until we are told where our person has gone. If he has gone to hell or purgatory, we then can pray for his/her restoration into heaven (Aoko interview)

### **The Attractions of the Legio Maria**

What attractions does the Legio Maria offer to its adherents? First, the movement is attuned to traditional fears, needs and aspirations. For example, it wages a fierce anti witchcraft campaign, as the fear of magic plays a large part in the thinking of the Luo, even of the Christians. Gaudencia Aoko was particularly strong in this area, as the *Reporter* issue of 17 July 1964 points out:

Gaudencia refuses to recognize that the witchdoctors . . . have supernatural powers. But ever since she went about preaching, converting thousands, and rising to become the unofficial leader of the sect, the main plank of her social message has been that witchdoctors are evil, and that for too long they have extorted money from simple Africans.

The message has had significant results. Audiences of thousands have had their fears of witchdoctors broken, scores of witchdoctors have been dragged to her meetings where she has publicly smashed their magic gourds, fed their magic bones to the dogs, scattered their cowrie shells to the winds (p. 17).

Further, as Dirven notes of the Legio Maria faith:

It also promises healing from physical and mental diseases—and the Luo suffer greatly from real or imagined diseases—not by means of native medicine or rituals, nor through western medical facilities, but by prayer, communal rituals, hypnotic trance and exorcism by which devils or evil spirits, the causes of sickness, are expelled (Dirven, “Protest”, p. 131).

Second, important in the attractiveness of the group is the fact that, though it claims to be open to all, it is largely composed of Nilotic Luo (Turner, p. 48). Thus, the Luo who join are joining a group that is both new and old. The newness adds an enticing freshness, while there is enough ethnic “oldness” to avoid a major dislocation. As a further factor in unifying the adherents, the movement is organised into smaller local groups where love, brotherhood and mutual aid reign; where personal and meaningful spiritual ministrations can take place; where even the half-educated can obtain positions of leadership; where social misfits may gain acceptance and prestige by tongue-speaking or other signs of ‘Spirit’-possession; where spontaneous prayer, full participation and mutually agreed policies make one’s membership significant. (Dirven, “Maria”, p. 131).

Third, the group claims to be both African and Catholic. It is reported that Gaudencia Aoko said:

We got the key to heaven from Jesus not Rome. Foreign missionaries just cannot understand the heart of the African people. We differ from them in that we believe that we all pray direct to God even though we are Africans. We get the key to heaven from Jesus, not from Rome (Aoko, cited by Kimulu, p. 16).

One bishop, Tobias Ayieta, said, “We are still Catholics although we don’t have anything to do with the Roman Catholics for we are Catholics in Africa and not Catholics in Rome. There is a big difference between Africa and Italy” (Kimulu, p. 16).

Though there can be no doubt of the Catholic leanings of the group, its preoccupation with deliverance from witchcraft, its healing services, its trances, prophecies and spirit possession, its avoidance of pork, smoking, drinking and dancing, its acceptance of polygamists, all suggest that its essential character is far from being decisively dependent on its Catholic origins (Shorter, pp. 177-8).

James Kombo concurs with this, writing that the “Catholicity” of the Legio Maria is really only a surface veneer covering of a very traditional mindset:

A casual view of this "dini" lets an observer compliment the way it is attuned to the traditional Luo. A careful examination through the glasses of the Bible on the other hand sees it as merely employing the Catholic forms of worship to resuscitate the religious past of the Luo (Kombo, p. 1).

Generally, the group offers the most to lapsed or marginal Catholics who have ethnic affinities with the Luo, though it has moved in a more Protestant direction since its founding (Barrett, *Schism*, p. 259).

#### Questionable Practices of Legio Maria

There are several practices of the Legio Maria which are questionable at best for the committed Christian. As with many cult leaders, Ondeto maintains a lavish lifestyle while exhorting his followers to live in all simplicity. Throughout the history of the group, there have been incidents, allegations, and actual judicial proceedings against some of the excesses practiced by the adherents. First, the Legio Maria early on ran into trouble with the newly independent Kenyan government. These problems came because the movement generally assumed a spirituality that tended towards ignoring governmental directives to work for the development of the nation, and tended towards ignoring or disobeying rules and regulations, including defying a ban on public meetings, not seeking official registration, avoiding tax payments, etc. (Dirven, "Maria", pp. 153, 181-96). Dirven points out:

They attributed a great value to prayer, but their time consuming journeys to prayer-meetings led to a serious neglect of family obligations and economic participation. Moreover their excessive reliance on the efficacy of prayer caused them to disregard ordinary human prudence in the fields of education, medical care and material preoccupations. In their view God would provide for everything as long as they kept praying (Dirven, "Maria", p. 187).

Second, there was trouble over adherents writing threats to people who disagreed with them. Even Ondeto himself indulged in this, allegedly informing one African priest "that an angel would kill him if he said Mass. In fact, Simeon was once taken to court for sending a threatening letter to a sub-Chief" (Dirven, "Maria", pp. 152-3).

Third, there were constant problems with allegations of sexual misconduct against both the leaders and the followers. Though many of the allegations cannot be ultimately proven true, there were definite cases of abuse. For example, one prominent leader was imprisoned for three years for defiling two young girls (ages nine and ten) (Dirven, "Maria", pp. 153, 189).

Fourth, several attempted and failed miracles may be noted (Dirven, "Maria", pp. 229-30). In one, a boy was told to climb to the top of a ladder and take off to heaven like an angel; he obeyed, fell down and broke a leg. In another, a bishop in his robes allowed himself to be buried alive, as Simeon Ondeto was going to raise him up again after four days; when dug up, he was dead, his robes torn, his face scratched. A third involves a member being told to walk across the Nzoia river on a tree trunk and fly off like an angel; he drowned.

Fifth, and finally, it has been alleged from the beginning that the priests and exorcists use fraud to obtain possessions and food for themselves. They do so by telling people that spirits are hiding in a particular item (goat, chicken, calabash, maize meal, etc.), and that the only way to deal with the spirit is to remove its hiding place. They then cart off the item to "protect" the person who is plagued by the spirits living in it (see the *Reporter*, 17 July 1964, p. 18), feeding themselves in the process.

### Ministering to Adherents of Legio Maria

#### *Important Considerations*

As with most cults, the movement is as much a way of life as anything else (Dirven, "Maria", p. 287). Therefore, straight doctrinal argument will not of itself win a Legio Maria to Christ. The Legio Maria adherent presents three particularly challenging problems, each of which raises significant difficulties in ministering successfully to followers of Legio Maria.

First, the Legio Maria adherent has a strong sense of his ethnic identity tied up with the group. This is not just any religious multi-ethnic group, it is a religious Luo group. As Dirven notes:

The Luo society possessed a number of religious features that form a striking parallel with some characteristics of Revivalism and Pentecostalism: religious song and dance, the prestige of charisma, spirit possession and spiritual healing, the power of prophecy and the gift of tongues, the existence and influence of spirits, the importance of the religious leader, the social value of taboos, etc. Consequently the Luo were predisposed to be attracted by the more extravagant features of Revivalism and Pentecostalism without necessarily deriving the benefit from the more sober and genuine concepts of these movements (Dirven, "Maria", p. 127).

Second, the average Legio Maria adherent will have an emotional aversion to a Protestant approach. He feels comfortable in his apparent Catholicism, and to break away to a Protestant-looking group would require a tremendous change in attitude. He is not just a member of any cult, he is a member of a Catholic-related cult. Further, he is chronologically a pre-Vatican II Catholic.

As such, he might not have touched the pages of the Bible. All he knows of "Messias" is what he has heard from the elite class of the priests. He needs to know that the biblical concept of "Messiah" is foreign to the traditional Luo and that the Baba Messias is filling the role of the traditional heroic prophet. Bethwell Ogot, in explaining the traditional Luo roles assumed by Ondeto, notes:

Prophets usually start their new life with some erratic behaviour—long fasts or secluded life in a forest for a period of time. In traditional Luo society some of the prophets were medicinemen . . . . They were also non-conformists, although their non-conformism was sanctioned by the spirit. Most of them were experts in divination by dreams which they believed to be the best method for foreseeing the future. Above all, they provided a supernatural focus for major community activities which centred on them, by reason of the necessity for obtaining their sanction before they could be undertaken. All these characteristics of a traditional prophet in a Luo society are found in Ondeto. He is the successor of the famous Luo prophets such as Gor Mahia, Odera Sande and Obondo Mumbo (Ogot, cited in Ranger, p. 40).

Third, and finally, the Legio Maria is not just a group, but a movement, as Ogot points out:

We shall argue that the Maria Legio of Africa Church is not only a protest movement, but also a prophetic movement. We shall further contend that the significance of this Church lies in the fact that it functions as a transforming spiritual and social agency creating new communities capable of facing the challenges of the modern world (Ogot, cited in Ranger, p. 34).

In addition to these three factors, we should point out that the adherents of Legio Maria are not aggressive in reaching others for their cause. They capitalise on the fact that the society in their geographic domain has recognised them as attuned to the traditional focus, needs, and aspirations. As with the traditional Luo prophets, medicinemen, and diviners, they do not go to the people. Rather, the people come to them (and to their shrines). As such, they rarely share their faith until the counselee either calls for them or visits their shrine.

#### *Suggestions for Ministry*

In light of the above considerations, we suggest as an overall framework of approach the cultivation of a genuine *agape* love for the adherents of the Legio Maria. There is no doubt that they need our love and compassion. How can this be demonstrated? We will list here several suggestions.



First, we must not approach them in an overly critical fashion. If we are too critical, they will quickly become uncooperative. We must start by loving them as people, just as we are.

Second, we must exercise great caution in considering whether or not ever to visit their worship shrines. It would be better to place our emphasis on inviting them to our homes and going to their homes.

Third, the Legio Maria adherents will need our patience. If we want them to listen to us, we first must be willing to listen to what they have to say.

Fourth, we must seek ways of providing an alternative community for them. If we are unable to do this, it will be extremely difficult to win Legios to Christ. This will be especially difficult for non-Luos, and Christians who are of Luo descent should be willing to take on as a special calling the task of winning Legio Marias to Christ.

Fifth, once a solid relationship is established with an adherent, we suggest that it would be best to approach the doctrinal areas through the use of inductive studies of whole books of the Bible, rather than just arguing over selected passages. Possible biblical books which would be relevant with respect to Legio beliefs would be 1 and 2 Thessalonians (for their eschatology), Ephesians (for their ecclesiology) and Hebrews (for their angelology). We would suggest avoiding the prophetic books of Revelation and Daniel until a solid doctrinal base is established, since the symbolism of those books lends itself to misinterpretation more readily than the discussions in the epistles mentioned.

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