



# Prophetic Movements: Eastern Africa

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# **Prophetic Movements: Eastern Africa**

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Eastern Africa has a long history of prophetic movements and cults, some linked to indigenous or “traditional” deities and spirits, some to Christianity, and others to Islam. These movements were reported from the earliest periods of colonial administration and missionary endeavor. Some were recognized as being efforts to overcome drought, famine, and other natural disasters; others were considered to be anti-European, often as atavistic manifestations of “heathen superstition,” and as destructive of the “order” brought about by colonial administrations and therefore to be put down by force. It has often been held that these movements were early examples of “resistance” to colonial overrule, but many were in existence long before the Europeans arrived. Although some have indeed been part of resistance movements, all have been more than mere responses to colonial rule and have been concerned also with divisions and conflicts within and between local societies and their various elite and commoner groups.

A distinction should also be made between healers and diviners, who are consulted by individual clients, and prophets and reformers, who attract and lead wide groups of followers and whose activities have political aims and consequences. Most of the recent prophetic movements have had as their immediate aim the purification of Christian and Muslim religious institutions, with the ultimate intended consequence of reforming and cleansing the whole of society. In some movements a religious ideology of restoration has been paramount; in others the emphasis has been on political and military resistance.

## **The Earlier Prophets**

The earliest movements were those led by the prophets of the Nuer and Dinka peoples of southern Sudan. Of these, the most famous was the Nuer prophet Ngundeng Bong (d. 1906), who in the 1870s built an immense earthen pyramidal mound where divine power became manifest to

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and in him. He claimed the ability to predict the future and to purify his people, who saw in his person the presence of Divinity. He and the many other prophets were the central ritual experts and peacemakers of the Nuer and Dinka peoples, concerned mostly with finding adequate land and pasturage in the ever-changing riverine environment of the southern Nile region and protecting their peoples from drought, plague, and famine. Nonetheless the British colonial administration saw them as hostile, and tried for many decades to weaken the prophets and to destroy their pyramids.

A second prophetic movement was that which guided the Maji Maji rebellion against the Germans in southern Tanganyika in 1905-1907. In response to a repressive policy of forced labor and cotton planting, armed protest galvanized around a powerful prophet, Kinjikitile, who united the disparate peoples. Kinjikitile was possessed by the spirit Hongo and delivered prophetic utterances from the high deity Bokero at a pool of mystically powerful water, the drinking of which was believed to make fighters immune to German bullets and inspired the consumers to join together to expel the German administration. Determined to retain their colonial holdings, the Germans used their superior weaponry to crush the movement, killing more than 75,000 people.

A third early prophetic movement was the Yakan cult among the Lugbara of northwestern Uganda, in which the prophet, Rembe (d. 1919), was not Lugbara but Kakwa. Here much the same pattern emerged: a cult, centered on a prophet who was believed to possess divinely given knowledge and mystical power, was transformed into a movement with an anticolonial ideology that inspired an armed uprising. The Lugbara first sought Rembe in the 1880s, as they wanted his help fighting epidemics of human and cattle sickness. They also wanted his assistance resisting the influx of Europeans and Arabs that was destroying the “traditional” ways of local life and livelihood. When these epidemics reappeared Rembe was again called to Lugbaraland in 1915. There he established himself at a pool in which there lived a rainbow-colored serpent. While possessed, Rembe received messages from the serpent. Women and men from a wide area drank the pool’s water, which was held to make them immune to bullets, to bring back the ancestors and dead cattle, and to cause Europeans and Arabs to vanish. The movement culminated in a small revolt in 1919 which was soon put down by the colonial powers. Rembe was taken to the Sudan and hanged at Yei. The overt similarities with the Maji Maji cult are striking, but there appears to have been no historical connection between them.

A longer-lasting movement was that known as Nyabingi among the Kiga people of southwestern Uganda. This dates back to the mid-nineteenth century with the appearance of mostly female prophets who were possessed by the “goddess” Nyabingi. In its early phase, the cult opposed the growing strength of the rulers of Rwanda and Ankole, and its leaders united local territorial and descent groups into wider defensive groupings. With the arrival of Europeans, a Nyabingi prophetess named Muhumusa arose around 1910 to lead the general resentment against the use of Ganda agents by the new British administration. She was deported and imprisoned until her death in 1945. The cult continued, however, and launched attacks upon Ganda agents and Christians. In the late 1920s these foreign agents were finally withdrawn and strategically replaced by local Kiga, who were predominantly Christians and unsupportive of the Nyabingi movement, which then died out.

There were also early Islamic movements: that led by el-Mahdi (1844-1885) in the Sudan; that of Sayyid Muhammad Abdallah Hasan (known by the British as the “Mad Mullah”) of Somaliland; and the movement led by Muslim reformers among the Swahili of the east African coast in the later years of the nineteenth century. The first two were overtly political, the aim being mainly to oust the colonial (and Christian) conquerors from Muslim lands. The third was concerned more with purifying the Islam practiced by patrician merchants of the coastal towns and with bringing former slaves into the mainstream of coastal society. The most famous reformer was Sayyid Saleh ibn Alwy ibn Abdullah Jamal al-Layl (known more familiarly as Shaykh Habib Swaleh, 1844-1935), who came to the town of Lamu from the Comoro Islands about 1880 and built the great Riyadh Mosque that has attracted pilgrims and scholars from throughout eastern Africa and beyond ever since.

### **Later Christian Movements**

Other prophets have been reported from all parts of eastern Africa throughout the twentieth century. They have been linked to the advent of Christianity in Africa in the sense that the leaders have either been considered emissaries of indigenous divinities sent to oppose Christianity, or have been African Christians attempting to purify and Africanize Christianity that was brought and controlled by European missionaries. Virtually all, at one time or another, became overtly political and held the aim of freeing their members and local societies from

colonial rule (and later from postcolonial governments), and so became part of “resistance” movements.

Certain common or widespread processes in the histories of these movements exist. One was that prophets have usually been concerned with fighting witchcraft and sorcery, which are the signs of societal and cultural confusion and disintegration. As reformers, prophets have tried to purify society from evil by appealing to “traditional” moralities. However, the basic criterion for defining these leaders as prophets has been their ability to transcend local social and religious groups and moralities and to construct new moral systems that are acceptable to culturally diverse groups over wide areas. In many cases traditional divinities have come to be seen as outmoded and ineffective on their own. As a result, the old notions of spirit possession, ancestral spirits, and mystical power have often been incorporated into Christianity, a universal religious framework that provides prophets with greater legitimacy and wider social networks upon which to draw.

Many of these movements have been local and temporary, but others have been long lasting and have entered history and tradition as events of central importance in African history. The successive prophetic cults and movements among the Gikuyu of central Kenya are an example of this. Here the first reported movements were overtly political associations such as Harry Thuku’s Young Kikuyu Association in the early 1920s, which was concerned with offsetting the effects of land alienation and improving the treatment of laborers. Soon there appeared in this and other associations a breach between older and younger people, the former adhering to traditional religious beliefs and the latter to Western education and Christianity. In 1929 the so-called “circumcision controversy” defined these conflicts more clearly. This was a conflict between Gikuyu and the European missions (especially the Church of Scotland and the Africa Inland Mission), which wanted to stop the practice of the clitoridectomy of girls. This led not only to conflict between Gikuyu and the Europeans but also between the more traditional and landowning elders (supported by the administration) and younger educated and generally landless men and women (considered untrustworthy citizens by the administration). Most Gikuyu Christians left the missions and established their own churches and schools. The two most important factions were the African Independent Pentecostal Church, linked to the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association, and the more radical and anti-mission African Orthodox

Church, which established the Kikuyu Karinga Educational Association and was linked to the leading political group of the time, the Kikuyu Central Association.

While this overtly Christian controversy was raging, another strand appeared in the form of the 1920s movement *Watu wa Mungu* (“People of God”). Gikuyu seers who refused European clothing and objects and who worshiped facing Mount Kenya, where dwelt the traditional Gikuyu High God, led the movement. *Watu wa Mungu* became linked to the highly political Kikuyu Central Association, whose secretary-general was Jomo Kenyatta (his book, *Facing Mount Kenya*, had its dustcover showing Kenyatta wearing the attire of the *Watu wa Mungu*). Although details are unreliable, there seems to have been an historical link between the seers of *Watu wa Mungu* and the leaders of the later Mau Mau revolt. The Mau Mau conflict is perhaps one of the most frequently cited examples of anticolonialist resistance, but it is important to note that the internal struggle between landed and landless Gikuyu was at the time equally as important.

There have been many other and similar prophetic movements in Kenya. One such movement for which there is reliable information was that known as Mumbo, among the Gusii of western Kenya. They believed in Mumbo, a god who had homes in the sky and in Lake Victoria and who appeared in a vision to a prophet called Onyango, who began preaching in 1913 among the Luo to the immediate northwest. Mumbo took the form of an immense snake linking sky and lake and promising a future of ease and prosperity to those who accepted its message. Adherents were to sacrifice to it and follow certain rules: to wear skins instead of European-style clothes; not to wash or cut their hair; and to perform traditional dances. Also, they were allowed or perhaps encouraged to smoke bhang (hashish). In the early 1920s the cult’s message spread among the Gusii, who had suffered military defeat by the Kenyan administration in 1905-1908 and heavy losses of men recruited as carriers in World War I. Also, their indigenous political leaders had been ignored by the administration and young educated men had been appointed in their place. The cult spread quickly in the 1930s after a period of drought and famine. There were several Gusii prophets of Mumbo, the two most powerful being a former prophet called Zakawa and a woman, Borairiri. The cult made sporadic appearances and attacks in 1933, in 1938, and again in 1947, after which time it mostly died out. Its message was bitterly opposed to the European administration and mission Christianity; hostility was largely directed against local administrative chiefs and officials.

A later movement was the Dini ya Msambwa (“Religion of the Ancestor”) among the Luhya of western Kenya, an area that had suffered from external interference since the time of the Arab-Swahili slave raiders of the mid-nineteenth century. Mumia (1871-1971), chief of the Luhya subgroup called Wanga, had been a central figure in the trade with the coast in slaves and ivory, and welcomed the British colonial administration, carefully placing many of his close kin as subchiefs throughout Luhya. During the interwar years European settlement had increased throughout Kenya, with alienation of land and continual demands for labor by European farmers. The first third of the twentieth century brought little prosperity to the Luhya and little hope for their future as independent peasant farmers.

In the late 1930s a prophetic leader, Elijah Masinde (d. 1987), appeared. A former Quaker mission convert, from the Bukusu subgroup of the Luhya, his aims were to expel the European administrative, settler, and mission presence and to return to the traditional religion of the Luhya, while retaining European material wealth. The movement spread rapidly within and beyond the Bukusu, with sporadic outbursts of destruction of European property and threats to mission supporters. The word *basambwa* means those ancestors to whom offerings are made, and *Msambwa* was the related term used to describe the creator divinity, Wele. Wele was associated with Mount Elgon and a lake near its peak, which the movement referred to as Zion. The water of the lake purified sinners and gave strength to the movement’s members by, among other things, making them immune to bullets. Other minor prophets and mediums, mostly men, assisted Masinde. Throughout their teaching continual reference was made to the Bible and its accounts of a millenarian society in which foreign oppressors had no place. In 1945, Masinde was committed to Mathari Mental Hospital, and although he was soon released he quickly lost his former influence. By the 1950s or so the movement had spread widely, but was no longer a Bukusu-only movement. It was proscribed after Kenyan independence, in 1968.

The Dini ya Msambwa also led in the 1950s to religious activity and prophecy among the Pokot, north of the Luhya; they followed a prophet of their own, Lukas Pkech. The aims were similar, and ended in 1950 with a military affray at Kolloa in which Pkech, many of his followers, and several European administrative and police officers were killed. The Kenyan administration exacted heavy penalties and the movement came to an end.

Both Mumbo and Dini ya Msambwa were clearly political resistance movements with religious ideologies, the latter incorporating Christian themes but at heart advocating a return to

“tradition.” Any purification of Christianity was a tangential aspect of its aims and activities; reversion to or revival of the traditional faith remained central. Christians were counted as enemies, although their Bible could be used as text to support prophecies made by Masinde and the other leaders.

A tendency toward violent resistance among other prophetic movements of the time and in the region accentuates the uniqueness of *Legio Maria*, a non-violent prophetic movement that began among the Luo of southwestern Kenya. Founded by Catholic lay member Simeo Ondeto (1920-1991) in 1963, the year of Kenya’s independence, Legio Maria has creatively combined conservative Catholicism, traditional religion, and charismatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit. It is the largest secession from the Roman Catholic Church anywhere in Africa, with membership estimates as high as two million. At first, followers regarded Ondeto as a prophet, sent by God to heal their sicknesses and to show them the secret to “all those wonderful things.” He was called *hono* (“the man who can do miracles”), and his followers believed that he could prophesy, cure the sick, raise the dead, make the blind see and the crippled walk, and cast out evil spirits. He was said to know what was happening in other places and to know what was in a person’s heart. Eventually, Legios came to believe that their prophetic leader was, in fact, Jesus Christ reincarnated in African skin and come to save them from their suffering. Today, images of Baba Messiah Ondeto and his mother, Bikra Maria (the Virgin Mary), adorn the altars of Legio Maria churches as well as the necks of Legio followers. Their elaborate services, based on the pre-Vatican II Latin mass, prominently feature healing rituals, exorcism, deliverance from witchcraft, prophecies, glossolalia, dream interpretation, visions, and spirit possession.

Kenya’s history as a settler colony was a central factor in the formation and orientation of radical movements like Mau Mau, Mumbo, and Dini ya Msambwa, whose prophets confronted the social dislocation caused by colonial rule by brazenly ordering the British out. Uganda, on the other hand, had few white settlers and a very different colonial history. There the best-known movement was that known as Abalokole (“the saved ones”), first among the Kiga and Hororo of southwestern Uganda and later among the Ganda and other groups. The movement began in the Ruanda Mission, an offshoot of the (Protestant) Church Missionary Society that had long worked among the Ganda. It established a mission at Kabale in 1921, and many of its members were Canadian Pentecostals. After the Nyabingi revolts of the late 1920s, in which men supplanted the traditional female diviners, the women moved to the Kabale mission. During the 1930s the



movement developed into a full-scale revival, largely under the guidance of a medical doctor, Joe Church (1899-1989). Membership required public confession of sins, repentance, and the renunciation of alcohol, personal adornment, and dancing; charismatic behavior in the form of trance and glossolalia was common. Salvation was sent by Christ and was not considered as resulting from an individual's act of will. The movement established itinerant teaching teams, some three-quarters of the members being women. It spread rapidly to Buganda and then to the rest of the country, and reached the Lugbara of far northwestern Uganda in the late 1940s as a women's movement. In Buganda during World War II, some of its leaders were imprisoned for advocating civil disobedience and nonpayment of taxes. However, the (British) bishops refused to expel Balokole members and retained them in the Church of Uganda on the premise that they were sincere, if misguided, Christian reformers. Balokole members and supporters have since played an important role in church affairs throughout Protestant Uganda. Abalokole has had few directly political aims but was intended to purify the church by the moral sanctification of church members and by "Africanizing" the church hierarchy. Nonetheless, it has exerted considerable influence in the choice of political leaders throughout southern Uganda.

A final movement that may be mentioned is the Holy Spirit Movement among the Acholi of northern Uganda. This prophet-led millenarian movement began in 1985, when it was believed that the Christian God sent a spirit called Lakwena ("Messenger") to Uganda, where he spoke through an Acholi woman named Alice Auma (1956-2007). Functioning in the style of the traditional spirit medium, Alice set up a shrine at Opit, where she offered cleansing rituals to Acholi soldiers rejected by their communities for committing indiscriminate acts of violence in Uganda's bloody civil war. After a short lived Acholi-led military coup, it became apparent that the Acholi people themselves were the targets of a punitive campaign launched by the rebel-leader-become-president, Yoweri Museveni, and his National Resistance Army. Lakwena responded, shifting tactics from a non-violent healing mission to a violent one, by deploying a military arm of the movement, the Holy Spirit Mobile Force, to fight the Uganda government. Its aim was to cleanse first the nation and then the world of evil, and to establish a new social order in which humans, the spirits, and the forces of the environment would live together in peace. Alice guided a number of highly successful military engagements on Lakwena's instructions until late 1987, when, on their march to take the capital, the force was defeated by the national

army just 50 kilometers from Kampala. Alice fled across the border to Kenya, where she lived in refugee camps until her death in 2007.

Alice Lakwena's Holy Spirit Movement may best be understood as a religiously based restorationist movement that responded to and was shaped by the particularities of Ugandan social history. Christian apocalyptic imagination, combined with traditional religious practices, played a critical role in reestablishing a sense of human agency by providing a redemptive framework for interpreting past events and directing future action. In the case of Alice, religion was not simply a tool used for political gain. Instead, the imaginative religious discourse espoused by the Holy Spirit Movement held an explanatory power and promised solutions for the problems of Acholi society that no political discourse could match. Operating within the synthesized framework of traditional Acholi religion and newer Christian apocalyptic, Alice and her followers engaged in religiously sanctioned violence that was seen as a just punishment on those who defied the moral order through indiscriminate acts of killing and as a necessary remedy for the purification of the people and the transformation of society. Alice's holy war, highly proscribed by a set of religious interdictions, was carried out by her Holy Spirit Mobile Forces as the primary means of creating order out of disorder. The destruction of their land, the loss of their livelihoods, and the death of their sons supplied the ominous apocalyptic signs of impending doom, and many Acholi looked for a prophet who would rescue them from extermination, give them justice against their enemies, and heal their broken society. Alice Lakwena appeared on the scene for such a time as this, announcing a truly prophetic and millenarian vision, by which God's kingdom and judgment would come on earth to set all things right.

## **Conclusion**

Despite their differences in beliefs, symbols, and social consequences, these and other eastern African movements shared certain basic features.

Prophets were believed to be emissaries sent by Divinity, often coming from outside the particular society. A problem was that of the identity of the divinity concerned, whether traditional, Christian, or Islamic. The first was tied to a particular society, the others were universal. Yet most of these movements conceived of divinity as forming a single source of power: the differences were in their respective congregations.

Prophets were always sacred persons, given knowledge and power by Divinity and not by their followers (here prophets differ from priests). A prophet had the ability to contact Divinity whether by possession and glossolalia or by the rainbow snakes that linked earth and sky. For this reason, they were formidable and strange figures. The often-reported prophetic behavior was the reversal of everyday comportment in matters of attire, food, sexuality, and frequently of gender. Prophets were not limited by ordinary constraints of time and space, and their superhuman deeds were proof of a divine connection – they traveled through the air; they assumed the forms of humans and animals; they prophesied at night or in the wilderness; they were able to turn bullets into water.

Prophets came in response to crises, to signs of breakdown or threat to a society's sense of order, certainty, and accepted traditions. Their message was one of purification and reform in order to restore those traditions and forms of society as the people imagined them once to have been. The prophetic messages were typically restatements of these traditions, by reconstruction and recombination of traditional elements deemed the opposite of those of the present day. Throughout the history of eastern Africa, it may be assumed that there were countless would-be prophets, each with their own ambitions and messages. Most of them either failed or remained quite local figures, vanishing from historical memory. A few, however, were accepted and gained a significant following.

In the cases presented earlier, there already existed certain basic conditions: the wretchedness and uncertainty in the lives of peasant farmers or urban laborers under the colonial or postcolonial regimes; long and dangerous epidemics striking humans and livestock; an increasing uncertainty about women's roles; worsening change and conflict in the relations between old and young, men and women, rich and poor, landed and landless, educated and noneducated, indigenous and stranger, and free and slave or ex-slave.

These conditions, however, had persisted for long periods without the appearance of popular prophets or reformers. For this there was need of a flash-point, a sudden impulse for people to act together to set perceived wrongs right, as with the Kenya missions' deciding to stop Gikuyu clitoridectomy or the German administration's imposition of compulsory cotton planting. These are examples of what historian Marcia Wright has referred to as a "prophetic moment" (p. 124) when a prophet was sought or appeared with a message that purported to reveal the Divine truth and the meaning behind the current conditions and events. The prophet's presence and

message transformed a human historical event into a moral and spiritual one; it removed the actors from everyday time and space, and convinced them that they were endowed with the creative power of Divinity as manifest in the prophet's person. The sacred was typically defined in terms of the reversal of the everyday, and the prophet's adherents were told to invert their normal behavior so as to remove themselves symbolically from everyday earthly authority and to share in Divinity. To reform society the movement's members had themselves to be reformed through the process of a *rite de passage* or rite of transformation, only after which could the transformed persons begin to reform society, and to make it as it had been and should again become.

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