

Kimkung, Samuel Naibei (1907–2005)

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Samuel Kimkung brought the Adventist faith to the Sabaot people of the Mt. Elgon area in Western Kenya. Even though he never became an Adventist himself, his resources and enthusiasm helped establish Adventism among the Sabaot people of Mt. Elgon area. A firm believer in the Adventist teachings and faith, Kimkung somehow never got around to join the Adventist Church but encouraged all his children and multiple wives to become Adventists. Today it is estimated that one out of every two Sabaot people is a Seventh-day Adventist, thus representing one of the ethnic groups in Africa with the highest number of Adventists.

Introducing the Adventist Faith to the Sabaot People

One morning in 1937, Kimkung took his bike and cycled down the slopes of Mt. Elgon from his home at Kapsokwony – going to the Chebwai Adventist Mission. He had heard of the newly established Adventist Mission at Chebwai some 50 km away and wanted to invite them to establish a church and school in his area. Chebwai Mission was still new having opened its doors only the previous year in 1936 through the effort of Peter Chetambe, a local Adventist evangelist. Chetambe had been brought to the faith by Caleb Kipkessio Busienei of Kaigat in Nandi who in turn was brought to the faith by the work of David Sparrow, the Adventist settler farmer of Eldoret. Chebwai Mission represented the best chance to enter Western Kenya and so the East Africa Union Mission superintendent Pastor Spencer Maxwell grabbed the chance and immediately travelled there and established a new Mission station. He appointed Pastor Matthew C. Murdoch who arrived in 1936 to take charge.

Samuel Naibei Kimkung approached Murdoch and requested the Adventists to establish a church and school at his native Kapsokwony.¹ From that 'Macedonian call', today the Seventh-day Adventist church is singly the largest denomination among the Sabaot of Mt. Elgon region of Western Kenya.

Early Life

Samuel Naibei Kimkung, a Sabaot, was born in 1907 in Malakisi which is in Teso country. The Teso are a Nilotic community different from the Sabaot people who are a division of the Nilo-Hamitic Kalenjin people. His parents

– Kisiro and Latebo Mukung were Sabaot folk who lived at this time among the Teso people who straddle the border between Kenya and Uganda. It so happened that the Sabaot had sought refuge among the Teso following frequent attacks from the Nandi, Maasai and other tribes interested in their cattle. Kimkung kept his father's flock of cattle and goats as any child would be expected to. The Teso on the other hand were interested in hosting the Sabaot to protect them against their perennial enemies the Basoga from further west in Uganda. The Sabaot did help repulse attacks on the Teso but after a while, the two communities disagreed and the former decided to return to their traditional homeland around Mt. Elgon on the Kenyan side. Kimkung returned with his parents.²

Education

One day in 1920 the young Kimkung encountered the '*Basomi*' or the 'The Educated' who were targeting young people below 18 to join schools. His uncle Chief Tendet who had come back with the original group from Teso country, encouraged Kimkung's father to send him to school. It was not easy to convince the old man that the young boy – who was an only child, should find an education. He was worried about who would care for his animals. Chief Tendet however prevailed upon him to send his son to school. With his father's consent, the Basomi took him to Kaptola at the Friends (Quakers) Mission there where he learnt to read and write. He stayed there until he had attained the grade three when he left to be circumcised in 1926.

Like the other Kalenjins, the Sabaot received Western education with lots of skepticism and they went to great lengths to avoid it. Kimkung however, was quite different. Chief Tendet was making sure that he was going to school as expected. After his circumcision, he felt that he had obtained sufficient education to venture out in life. He was able to clearly read and write. In 1927 he got a job as a court clerk working at Kamtiony. Demand for such positions was so high and he carried out his duties well. He rose up the ranks of the 'Native Courts' as they were known then. In 1936 he married and later that year his first son Hezbon Naibei Kimkung (Chesbol) was born. He began his early education at the Kapsokony Adventist School and it was on the ground of that school that the Kapsakwony church was built.

The Adventist Work Among the Sabaot

In June 1939 Murdoch visited Kapsokwony and there, oversaw the construction of the mud and wattle structure thatched with grass. This was to become part of the school. He describes his tour in *The Advent Survey*:

It was interesting to visit this last-named tribe (the Sabaot) away up on the slopes of Mount Elgon. They live, during the rainy season, in great natural caves of volcanic rock because of the shortage of grass for thatching huts. As the usual native crops do not grow at the high altitude they earn their livelihood by gathering wild honey which they bring down to the lowlands to barter for maize and vegetables.

On a recent preaching tour, we visited the chiefs and their people in a number of the dozen remaining tribes, distributing our literature in the Swahili language, and treating the sick as we went along. They gave us a cordial welcome, some even pleading with us to send teachers among them. There was one exception, however, in the person of a chief who was a sturdy protagonist of another mission body. If we could only find some way whereby a trained teacher could be placed in each of these tribes the work would grow quickly and strongly³

Murdoch went ahead and inspected the new site at Chemoge where a new Adventist church and school was established. He was astonished at the tremendous reception of the Adventist faith by the Saboot. Murdoch returned to Chebwai with a letter of authority from Chief Tendet whom he had met while on the tour. Chief Tendet had been rooting for the Quakers but with some persuasion by his nephew Samuel Kimkung, he became convinced that the Adventists should run the schools.

In June 1940 Spencer Maxwell then the president of the EA Union visited Kapsakwony and was received by Kimkung whom he found building more classrooms in his school. He wrote about his tour in *The Advent Survey* saying:

The president of the local tribunal had invited us to commence work among these people. We found a large school building in process of erection. The president was hauling the trees from the forest with his oxen. A lively group of youngsters are meeting for school in an unfinished house. The old folk gathered while we were examining the school and listened intently while the Word was explained.

The words of the prophet are once again being fulfilled: "...after will I send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain, and from every hill, and out of the holes of the rocks." Jer. 16:16⁴

To bolster the work in the Mt. Elgon area, Murdoch set on John Moremo as the first evangelist in the Kapsokwony area. Interest in the Adventist message grew and Murdoch sent yet another teacher/evangelist David Jakinda to hasten the work. Jakinda did marvelous work at the area with many of the pupils and village folk being baptized into the church. Soon the company at Chemoge was organized into a church and Isaiah Omwega from Kisii was sent there. Murdoch's successor D. M. Swaine sent Justmore Simwenyi to the church/school at Chemoge to relieve Isaiah Omwega who moved to Kapsokwony. He worked through to 1947 when Caleb Kipkessio araap Busienei was sent to Mt. Elgon to oversee the work. Busienei served as the pastor of the area bringing even more into the faith.

In 1947 Ezekiel Inzai Butasi was sent to serve as the new Headmaster of the Kapsokwony Adventist School. The first Campmeeting for the new churches in Kapsokwony was in August 1947 and here even more people gave their lives to Christ. The church was now organized with formal structures. The first church elder at Kapsokwony was Krispo Kiptot. The first Church Clerk was Timothy Kwalia. The first Deacon was Wilson Poloman. The first Deaconess Esther Timothy. The first Sabbath-school superintendent was Johnson Shari⁵

After the Campmeeting, Caleb returned to his station at Kaigat and in his place Peter Chetambe was sent. Chetambe worked through the years 1948 to 1956. Chetambe baptized many people in this area. However, when he left there was no baptism through the year 1957 to 1961. Pastor Phanael Juma was then posted to Mt. Elgon and now new baptisms were again counted. Many people were baptized at the Kaprot area on the River Kabukea. Some of those who were baptized by Juma and Chetambe were Edoan Apollo, Jason Taboi, Zipporah Jason, Beatrice Kisiero, Joel Mochomu, Mrs Eliud Wandiemba and Japheth Muhindi.

In the period 1938-1960 four churches were organized in the Mt. Elgon area. These were – Kapsokwony, Chemoge, Kaprot (pioneered by Japheth Muhindi) and Labot. Between 1961 and 1970, eight more were organized – Kaptama (pioneered by Johnson Shari), Sambocho (pioneered by Peter Shabathi Ngeywa), Lutonyi, Misikhu (pioneered by Naftal Wanyonyi), Lutacho, Kisuluni, Kitale 'B' and Kibisi. Between 1971 and 1980 seven more were organized. These were Kamusindi, Kamneru, Kubura, Masaek (organized in 1978 after a Youth effort led by Pastor Nathan Oyiengo), Kambi (Gitwamba), Koykoy (organized by Paul Borter) and Chesowos (organized by Chesebe Mein among others) and Kamneru (organized by Joel Mochomu).

Others include Chepyuk organized in 1976 by William Kimei and Kanai. Between 1981 and 1990 saw the greatest leap with some 17 new churches being organized. These were Cheptor, Chepkurkur, Kabukwo, Chongeywo, Kipyeto, Kapchebon, Mount, Biwuut, Kaboywo, Chelelmook, Marigo, Cherendyo, Chemeker, Chemondi and Namwela.

Although Samuel Nabei Kimkung never became an Adventist, the seed he planted grew tremendously so that today the Adventist church is unquestionably the largest denomination in Mt. Elgon area. He died in 2005.

SOURCES

Maxwell, S. G. "The Cave Dwellers of Elgon." *The Advent Survey*, July-August 1940.

Murdoch, M. C. "North-West Kenya Mission." *The Advent Survey*, June 1939.

NOTES

1. M. C. Murdoch, "North-West Kenya Mission," *The Advent Survey*, June 1939, 3-4.
2. Hezbon Naibei Chesbol Kimkung (son of Samuel Naibei Kimkung and elder of the Kapsokwony Church), interview by the author, at Kapsokwony, July 16, 2015.
3. Murdoch, 3-4.
4. S. G. Maxwell, "The Cave Dwellers of Elgon," *The Advent Survey*, July-August 1940, 5.

5. From a historical report authored by Joel Mochomu and availed to the author.

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