

Ating'a, Mordecai (1906–1976)

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Mordecai Ating'a was a pioneer Adventist missionary in Central Kenya.

Early Life

Mordecai Ating'a was born in 1906 in Ngere village in South Kamagambo, at a place presently known as Kanyawanga. His father, Mzee Nyakure, had married a Kisii woman named Kerubo, who was his fourth wife. The Kamagambo area was the border between the Kisii and Luo, and intermarriage between the two communities was fairly common. The two communities were often at war, and intermarriage was seen as a way of building peace between them. Kerubo had two sons; Ating'a was the eldest, followed by another named Munda.¹

Kerubo died when Munda was about two, and Mzee Nyakure struggled to bring up the two boys. Realizing the children were at risk, he turned to the missionaries at Kamagambo for help. The Kamagambo Mission Station was opened in 1913 by pioneer missionary Arthur Carscallen.² The following year, when the First World War broke out, Carscallen was forced to close down Kamagambo, and it was not until 1916 that he resumed his work there.³ It was about this time that he founded the Kamagambo School, and the two little boys found a place to be cared for and educated.

Education and Ministry



Pr. Mordecai Ating'a with Mama Miriam Choni in 1966. Behind them is their son Jonah, now Prof. John Ating'a, a leading orthopaedic surgeon in Kenya.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Peninah Ogada.

Ating'a began his early education at Kamagambo, and took up the name Mordecai. His brother Munda took the name Eliakim. Ating'a was baptized after he completed his education and made the decision to join ministry. In 1929 he married Miriam Choni, from Kodera in Homa Bay. She too had been taken in at Kamagambo as an orphan, and remained at the mission training under Grace Clarke, who had established the Kamagambo Girls School in 1922.⁴ Other than the usual curriculum, Clarke's program focused on training young women on important aspects of homecare, including general hygiene, childcare, and home nursing⁵ They were prepared to become suitable spouses to the young men who were about to take into ministry. The matches were also made by the mission.⁶

Miriam was introduced to Mordecai and they were married at the Kamagambo Church. Together, they moved to Gendia where they worked with Walter W. Armstrong who had just been transferred from Kanyadoto Mission. Armstrong moved to Kenya in 1920 and took his first mission work at Kanyadoto, remaining there until 1928. He then moved to Gendia to become the superintendent of the Kenya Mission.⁷ The Kenya Mission was responsible for the Adventist work in the entire Kenya colony.

At Gendia, Ating'a worked with the early African evangelists, particularly Mariko Otieno, who had also worked with Armstrong at Kanyadoto and had now become the department secretary for publishing, possibly the highest ranking African in the early mission work.⁸ Others who worked with him included K. Obwagi, Y. Ouma, and D. Orwa. Another was Paul Mboya, who was ordained into ministry in 1931, becoming the first ordained Kenyan minister.⁹ Meanwhile, Ating'a continued attending end-year ministerial classes at Kamagambo while still attached to Gendia. He also served as a pastor in various churches in Kisii country.

Armstrong took a liking to Ating'a, noting his devotion to duty, and decided that he would go with him to his new mission posting at Karura.

Moving to Karura

In 1933, Armstrong selected Mordecai Ating'a to join him as a pioneering missionary to Central Kenya. He was one of four, the others being E. Owino, Jeremiah Oigo, and Armstrong himself. Ating'a moved to Karura with his wife Miriam and their children Julia and Noah. Miriam lived the frugal life of a low-paid missionary wife. She became friends with the local Kikuyu women, learning to speak their language. Karura was established at the edge of European settler farms and the Kikuyu reserve of Kiambu, some six miles outside Nairobi. Miriam would accompany the Kikuyu women to forage in European farms, which was often a perilous venture due to strict trespass laws of that time.¹⁰

Pastor Ating'a launched into ministry in Kikuyu country. He was almost always away from home, going up to do evangelism work far into Kikuyu country. Armstrong divided them up, retaining Ating'a to work with him among the Kikuyu, while Jeremiah Oigo was sent to pioneer the work among the Kamba. Owino would remain at Karura as a teacher at the new school (what is today Karura Adventist School), but also double up as an evangelist

among the populous Kikuyu people. Oigo endured great hardship bringing the Adventist message to the Kamba people. He often slept in filthy chicken houses, or out in the open by the roadside, and would almost always be without food.¹¹

It was not any better for Ating'a and Owino, who often had to sleep in disused animal huts, one of them developing tick fever as a result.¹² Illness greatly affected the work at Karura. Armstrong himself often came down with long bouts of illness. Owino left in 1935, and with Oigo away in Kamba country, Ating'a was left alone as the sole evangelist among the Kikuyu. In 1936, J. Digo was brought in to replace Owino.¹³

Pastor Spencer Maxwell, then the superintendent of the East Africa Union, was forced to step in and assist Armstrong in the mission work at Karura. Maxwell and Ating'a moved about the Kikuyu country, going as far as Chuka, Karatina, and Embu. Being constantly ill, Armstrong was forced to return to England on an early furlough, and eventually went on permanent return in 1939.¹⁴

Return to South Nyanza

In 1944, Pastor Ating'a ended his tour of Central Kenya, returning to South Nyanza to continue in ministry there.¹⁵ He was first posted to Sori, part of the Kanyadoto Mission. Two more children had been born to the Ating'as at Karura, Japheth and Sarah, and while at Sori Peninah another was born. Although they lost a number of children in infancy, Polycarp followed in 1946, and Jonah in 1947.

Kanyadoto Mission was closed soon thereafter and moved to Ranen. Mordecai Ating'a continued as a licensed minister in various churches under the Ranen Mission, then returned to Nyanchwa before moving to the Gendia Mission. In 1954 he returned to Ranen and was appointed a district pastor. He continued in this and various other church districts, eventually retiring in 1966. By this time, he had settled in Omware in South Kamagambo, where his family lived. In retirement he continued in ministry, this time as a literature evangelist. He died September 13, 1976, and was survived by Julia, Polycarp, Peninah, Japheth, and John. Miriam Ating'a died May 12, 1985.¹⁶

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Dr. Peninah Ogada, interview by author, April 11, 2021.
2. Virgil E. Robinson, "Kamagambo Training School: Kamagambo—Since Yesterday," *The Southern Africa Division Outlook*, December 15, 1955, 4.
3. Ibid.
4. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Kamagambo."
5. E.R. Warland, "Evangelists' Institute Held at the Kamagambo Training School, East Africa," *The Advent Survey*, Dec. 1, 1929, 9.
6. Dr. Peninah Ogada, interview by author, April 11, 2021. The main argument was that if the young men launched into ministry without properly trained and educated spouses, they could encounter difficulties in their work as they may find themselves pulled in opposite directions from their spouses.
7. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1930), 214.
8. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1933), 148.
9. Ibid.
10. Dr. Peninah Ogada, interview by author, April 11, 2021.
11. S. G. Maxwell, "First-Fruits in a New Field," *The Advent Survey*, June 1935, 1.
12. Ibid.
13. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1937), 156.
14. F.H. Thomas, "Extracts from Kenya Report," *The Advent Survey*, January 1, 1940, 8.
15. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1945), 159.
16. Dr. Peninah Ogada, interview by author, April 11, 2021.

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