

# Nyambo, Peter

## (c.1884–1968)

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Peter Nyambo was a missionary to British East Africa, Malawi teacher, and political activist.

### Early Life

Peter Nyambo became the first Adventist missionary to British East Africa, together with Asa A. Carscallen when they arrived on November 27, 1906. He was born circa 1884 in Ntcheu District, Nyassaland (now Malawi), about one hundred miles south of capital Lilongwe and near the border with Mozambique.<sup>1</sup> He was the son of Nyambo,<sup>2</sup> a chief of the Ngoni people who are ethnically related to the Zulu. He began his early education in 1895 at the Zambezi Industrial Mission in Blantyre, established in 1892 by Joseph Booth, a British businessman turned missionary.<sup>3</sup>

### Under the Influence of Joseph Booth

Booth was born in 1852 in Derby, England and was largely self-educated through extensive reading. This caused him to adopt radical ideas on social and religious issues.<sup>4</sup> His father was a Unitarian, and he quit to join the Baptist Church. In 1872 he married and became a father of two daughters. In 1880 he emigrated to Auckland, New Zealand.<sup>5</sup> In 1887 he left Auckland for Melbourne, Australia, where he established a successful business. In 1891 his wife died, and he sold his business, left Australia, choosing to become a missionary in Africa with his daughters.

Booth established the Zambezi Industrial Mission on 25,000 acres he purchased and founded a school. It was at this school that young Nyambo began his education. At the same time, Booth took into his household John



Peter Nyambo in 1904

Photo courtesy of British Union Conference.

Chilembwe, who would be an important pre-Independence leader of the people of Nyasaland<sup>6</sup> Booth was a man of considerable radical thought and fired salvos at the Scottish Presbyterian Mission in Blantyre for refusing to admit Africans as full church members.<sup>7</sup> He advocated for Africans to run their own churches with no European control and so began to train African pastors toward this aim. One of these would be John Chilembwe whom he took to the United States in 1897 and enrolled in the Virginia Theological College, and the National Baptist Convention paid for his education.

He also believed that the Africans could run their own political affairs, even advocating for their independence. These ideas would prove to be of great influence to Chilembwe, and doubtless to the young Peter Nyambo. Chilembwe returned to Malawi in 1900, an ordained minister, and began his own mission.

## Becoming a Seventh-day Adventist

Just by reading the Bible, Nyambo came to the conclusion that Saturday and not Sunday was the biblical Sabbath and thus began to challenge Booth over the matter. It began when a teacher at the Zambezi Industrial Mission who, while teaching about the Ten Commandments, roused the interest in little Nyambo about the actual day of the Sabbath.<sup>8</sup> It spurred a desire to study more, and after he had enough material, he then confronted the teacher about why they attended church on the first day (Sunday) and not on the seventh day (Saturday). The teacher explained that it was because of the rising of Christ.<sup>9</sup> This did not satisfy the young mind, and the teacher asked him not to bring up the matter again. But by then the interest of several young people had been roused.

Nyambo had heard of someone who kept the Sabbath down at Cholo (now Thyolo) and together with his friends walked the 160 miles (257 km) over four days to reach the man to make their inquiry. The man explained that indeed the Sabbath had been changed from Saturday to Sunday.<sup>10</sup> The young people returned and began teaching the others from the scriptures about the biblical Sabbath, and over one hundred young people were moved to join them, only that they did not even know that there was a denomination known as the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Little is known about how Booth changed from worshiping on Sunday to Saturday, but it appears most likely that it was Nyambo who led Booth to that.

Meanwhile Booth got into serious disagreements with the members of the Baptist Church about running the mission (perhaps because of the Sabbath issue). In 1897 he formed a charitable society and transferred the affairs of the mission to it.<sup>11</sup> He then severed ties with the mission and moved to Cholo where he founded the Plainsfield Mission as a Seventh-day Baptist institution. He moved there with Peter Nyambo and most of the young people who had started observing the seventh day (Saturday).

In 1902 Nyambo moved to connect with Joseph Watson, who was an early Seventh-day Adventist minister who clarified to him about the Seventh-day Adventists. Peter Nyambo had finally found a spiritual home. Booth, too, agreed and became a Seventh-day Adventist, and he decided to turn Plainfield into an Adventist mission. He

immediately connected with the General Conference about this desire. Moving fast, the General Conference took over Plainfield Mission, which became the first formal Adventist mission in Malawi.

The Plainfield Mission, situated 62 km south of Blantyre, comprised of a land area of some 2,000 acres of land, which had buildings constructed by Booth. The General Conference then sent back Joseph Booth and an African-American Thomas H. Branch and his family to work in the new mission. The Branch family established an elementary school, and their daughter, Mabel, became a teacher there.

Booth still held strong opinions about Africans taking over and running their own political and spiritual affairs. It was probably these opinions that informed the choice of Thomas Branch to move to Plainfield. But then his political mind began to strain his relations with his fellow Seventh-day Adventists who traditionally shunned political activities. After six months he decided to move to South Africa and took with him Peter Nyambo.

## Moving to England

In 1900 Nyambo had moved to Plainfield with Booth and continued his education there. He was present when Plainfield was converted to a Seventh-day Adventist mission in 1902. In February 1903, after the Branches got settled in. Booth decided to leave for England, and this time went with Nyambo. He enrolled Nyambo at a school in Matlock, Derby, and he lived with the Booth family there. Early in 1904 Booth enrolled Nyambo at the African Institute in Colwyn Bay, northern Wales, ran by W. Hughes who had worked with Booth in a plan to train African clergy back in Nyasaland.<sup>12</sup>

## Student at Duncombe Hall

In September 1904 he joined Duncombe Hall Missionary College, at Holloway Road, London.<sup>13</sup> The college was the first Adventist institution in Britain and which is now Newbold College. There were 73 students in total, and Nyambo was the first and only African student. The Holloway Road Campus was set up by a busy street, and the noise of the traffic was a major inconvenience to the learners.<sup>14</sup> Changes were made in 1904 to move to quieter premises. Joseph Booth paid in £1.00 toward Nyambo's upkeep<sup>15</sup> (this amount marked as the Peter Nyambo Fund and adjusted for inflation is equivalent to £124.73 in 2021 pounds sterling).<sup>16</sup> Nyambo now came under the tutelage of Professor H. R. Salisbury and Professor H. Camden Lacey, who had just returned to England to teach at Duncombe. Their instructor for canvassing was S. Joyce.

Together with the other students at Duncombe Hall, Nyambo did the London circuit of colporteur work selling the magazine *Present Truth* and the book *Good Health*.<sup>17</sup> This was London emerging from the Victorian era, and the idea of a black African selling Christian literature in London, though not unusual, must have appeared strange to many. He was basically evangelizing to Europeans when the opposite was the norm. In December 1904, despite the severe cold of winter, he managed to sell 50 copies of *Good Health*.<sup>18</sup>

In 1904 L. R. Conradi, then the president of the European Division, toured Africa and passed through the established mission in German East Africa. Seeing that there was an African from an English-speaking colony studying at Duncombe Hall, Conradi quickly identified him as the right missionary to help open up the work in British East Africa. Vice president of the British Union Conference E. E. Andross then arranged for Nyambo to go to British East Africa as a missionary. Since British Central Africa was already entered, it was decided that Nyambo would be more useful in unentered British East Africa.

Nyambo's appointment was going to be the first foreign mission of the British Union Conference and toward this, Andross earnestly sought help by contributions from British Adventists at that time. He set up a box in the churches to which money could be placed each Sunday morning (known as the First-day offering<sup>19</sup>) to support the entry into British East Africa.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile Professor H. R. Salisbury, who taught Nyambo at Duncombe Hall, published in *The Missionary Worker* portions of the report by the commissioner of British East Africa (Sir Charles Eliot) on what life really was like in that country.<sup>21</sup>

Salisbury was more interested in the part of the report on Kavirondo (presently Luo Nyanza /Western Kenya), highlighting the prevalent diseases in the area.<sup>22</sup> He cited the prevalence of sleeping sickness, malaria, and dyspepsia, which the report stated had claimed the lives of a number of Europeans.<sup>23</sup> This was important background information on what awaited the missionaries.

On December 13, 1905, Nyambo was baptized at Duncombe Hall together with 13 other students.<sup>24</sup> He was now a Seventh-day Adventist in good and regular standing.

## Tour of Europe

It was at Duncombe Hall that he met the great German missionary and mission planter L. R. Conradi, who encouraged him to complete his studies and move to establish the mission work in unentered British East Africa. Towards this, he arranged for him to move to Germany to study briefly at Friedensau, near Berlin, to gather practical knowledge on conducting mission work. It helped that Nyambo could speak the Kiswahili language that was fast becoming the *lingua franca* in East Africa. Conradi also arranged for him to connect with the German East Africa Mission that had been opened in Tanganyika since 1903.

In May 1906 Nyambo completed his studies at Duncombe Hall. A reception was held in his honor, and he was presented with a traveling clock and a case inscribed *To Peter Nyambo, presented by the teachers and students of Duncombe Hall Training College, May 1906*.<sup>25</sup> On May 30 he left for Germany and spent a week at Hamburg at the church headquarters for Europe in Grindelberg.<sup>26</sup> He then moved on to Friedensau, the Adventist missionary college (now Friedensau Adventist University), some 120 km west of Berlin.<sup>27</sup> He was on a tour of Europe that was to end at the start of September when he was to join Arthur A. Carscallen, then based in Hamburg, Germany, to journey to East Africa.<sup>28</sup> Nyambo shared his time between both places.<sup>29</sup>

Between July 5 to 9, 1906, Nyambo attended the German-Swiss Conference session held at Künsnacht south of Zurich, Switzerland.<sup>30</sup> All the important leaders of the Adventist Church in both Germany and Switzerland were in attendance, and among them were L. R. Conradi, James H. Erzberger, and William A. Spicer. Nyambo was given a chance to speak and narrated how 100 young people in his native Nyasaland had come to the conclusion that the biblical Sabbath was Saturday without having any contact with Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>31</sup> A first-day offering call was made for Nyambo, and some \$40 was raised (close to US\$1,200 in 2021 dollars).<sup>32</sup>

The following month, August 16 to 19, Nyambo was a guest at the general meeting of the Holland and Flemish Belgium Mission at the Hague, Holland.<sup>33</sup> The following month on September 9, 1906, Nyambo was in Lisbon, Portugal with Carscallen and G. Sander, the guests of Clarence E. Rentfro, the pioneer missionary to Portugal. Rentfro, an American, opened the work in Portugal when he arrived in 1904 and two years later was joined by Brazilian Ernesto Schwantes, an ordained minister. Nyambo, Carscallen, and Sander had church at the Rentfro home at Caxias just outside Lisbon. Schwantes and his family were also present.

Nyambo told the meeting that when he was preparing to come to Europe, he was told that the Europeans would kill him and eat him. But when he arrived in Europe, he learned that the *Europeans* believed that the Africans killed and ate people.<sup>34</sup> Nyambo told them how his home country had been a part of Portuguese East Africa before it came under the British Central Africa. At that time, Portuguese East Africa (presently known as Mozambique) wasn't yet entered. In all, Nyambo gave 160 plus speeches in various places during his European tour.<sup>35</sup>

From Portugal, Nyambo returned to England, and prepared to leave for Africa.

## Return to Africa

On October 22, 1906, Nyambo's boat left for Africa. It was Arthur A. Carscallen who had been chosen to pioneer with him the mission in British East Africa.<sup>36</sup> There was also Sander who was to join the work in German East Africa. They arrived in Tanga, the Tanganyika port of GEA. They moved to the Friedenstal Mission in the Pare Mountains pioneered by A. C. Enns and W. Ehlers. They remained there a few weeks. Sander joined the work in the new station Vuasu that was later renamed Suji.<sup>37</sup>

Leaving Sander behind, Enns moved up with Nyambo and Carscallen to Mombasa then took the train with them to Kisumu. They then took a small steam launch that got them to Kendu Bay arriving on November 27, 1906. They secured a mission campus of 320 acres about a mile and a half from the lake on top of a hill with sweeping views of the countryside. They named the place Gendia. They paid 640 rupees for the land although Carscallen thought he should have paid 120 rupees less.<sup>38</sup> The exchange rate between pounds sterling and the newly introduced East Africa rupee was 1s 4d<sup>39</sup> (1 shilling 4 pence or simply put, 9 pence).<sup>40</sup> The European Division had given them a cash complement of £350 (adjusted for inflation, it had a similar purchasing power of £43,654.07 as of 2021).<sup>41</sup> With the exchange rate, £350 was equivalent to 3,889 EA rupees.<sup>42</sup> This was definitely sufficient to

meet their immediate needs.

After they arrived in Gendia, they lived in temporary structures but soon constructed a stone dwelling and started plans for a school. They also set about learning the Luo language. Enns remained with them until May 1907 when he returned to Tanganyika.

On July 27, 1906 J. D. Baker and his wife arrived in Mombasa together with Ms. Hellen Thompson of Glasgow. Carscallen traveled to Mombasa to receive them and while there was united in marriage with Ms. Thompson by Baker. Baker and his wife were nurses.<sup>43</sup> It is not clear if Nyambo had traveled with him to Mombasa. The new couple settled in at Gendia while the Bakers helped establish the new school at Gendia in preparation for their own mission station at Wire Hill.

In March 1907 Nyambo wrote back to a lady friend in England describing the situation in Luo Nyanza in glowing terms. He described the Luo people as very friendly, and every time he moved about the villages, they greeted him as *Misawa*, which means "friend." He wrote:

One day I was reading some Kavirondo words to them, which I have copied from one of the missionaries who passed through here a few months ago, and I tell you, sister, God is preparing the people for His coming. As I was reading it, one of them asked me a question: "Is that what you are going to teach us?"

"Yes," said I. And when they heard me say yes, they told me: "We will come to school to learn more of God." This is the word that I read to them: *Aciei Morewo Nyasaye Kodi d'ano, d'ano Isa Masia.*" I am very glad I can speak the Swaheli (sic) language. I did not find Swaheli very difficult to learn, but the Kavirondo language is very hard for everyone, but considering the time that we have been among the people, I am getting on well with the language.<sup>44</sup>

Clearly he had made good his work as a missionary. The lady he wrote to isn't named, but she was clearly one with whom he had established close relations while back in England. Seeing that he was the only one yet to be married, there were no marriageable ladies among the Luo to match his level of education. But at the age of 22, it was not a crisis, and even now as the Bakers had arrived, it was time for him to leave for Nyasaland where his prospects for a bride were much better.

## Return to Nyasaland

On Christmas day of 1907, Carscallen and Nyambo left Gendia for Kisumu and attended the United Missionary Conference at Maseno, organized by Rev. J. J. Willis of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and founder of the mission at Maseno (1906). The conference brought together pioneer missionaries from all over Kenya including Chilson of the Friends Africa Industrial Mission, Kaimosi, W. R. Hotchkiss of the Lumbwa Industrial Mission in Kericho, and Dr. E. Scott of the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) from Thogoto Kikuyu among others.<sup>45</sup> This conference lasted for five days, and Carscallen presented a paper entitled "Work Among the Native Tribes," with

reference to the Luo.<sup>46</sup> Subsequent conferences discussed among other things the coming together of all the missions (the desirability of a common native church) which sounded to the Adventists more like Ecumenism, which they traditionally shunned. The conferences eventually led to the Alliance of Protestant Missions (APM), but by this time the Adventists had opted out.

On January 5, 1908, Nyambo left British East Africa for his native Nyasaland. He took the train to Mombasa and the boat to southern Africa. On January 24, 1904, his boat landed him at Chinde, the town on the Indian Ocean at the mouth of the Zambezi River in southern Mozambique. He immediately wrote back to England to assure them that he had arrived safely.

## At Malamulo Mission

Nyambo eventually reached his old school at Plainfield. In 1907 Joel C. Rogers took over the Plainfield Mission from Thomas Branch and renamed it "Malamulo," the local word for "commandments," which the Adventists were known for.<sup>47</sup> That name holds to this day. Nyambo was assigned to teach at the school. Mrs. Rogers taught one grade while Nyambo taught the other, presumably the upper one.<sup>48</sup>

## At Matandani Mission

Nyambo remained at Malamulo until 1908 when he moved to Matandani, the new mission station pioneered by Mrs. Joel Rogers. She traveled largely by donkey to a new mission site 80 miles (130km) northeast of Blantyre near the border with Mozambique. In 1908 Americans S. M. Konigmacher and his wife moved in to join Nyambo. They secured a 200 acre campus for \$112.<sup>49</sup> The Konigmachers were nurses, and Nyambo took charge of the school program. He moved to establish about six more schools.

## Differences With the Adventists

It was at Matandani that Nyambo began to express dissatisfaction with the way things were being run in the Adventist missions. First, English was only taught at Malamulo, and all the other schools taught in the vernacular. The schools did not go beyond the Standard 3, and perhaps Nyambo felt too qualified for that. In 1911 he left and returned to his home district Ntcheu. By the end of that year, Joseph Booth had returned from England and was now based in South Africa. Nyambo then started building independent schools (not affiliated with the Adventist Church) and equipped them with teachers from his old school—Zambezi Industrial Mission.<sup>50</sup>

Meanwhile, Nyambo was elected the secretary of the British Christian Union for Central Africa, the organization that had been founded by Booth at Capetown in 1896. The following year, 1912, Nyambo moved to South Africa with his close friend Alexander Makwinja and others. It was in South Africa that he came more closely associated with Booth who was now openly political, calling for an end to colonial rule.

## Political Activism

In March 1913 Nyambo wrote an article critical of European authority in Nyasaland that was published in the *South African Spectator*. He began to protest against land issues, segregation, and other ills of the colonial regime back home. In May 1914 he wrote a petition entitled the *Rhodesia Nyasaland Appeal*, a document that appealed to the British Crown to intervene in the maltreatment of Africans in Rhodesia and Nyasaland. This document catapulted him to the front line of the political activism against colonial rule. This petition was signed by numerous South African legislators, as well as Booth himself. Now with hindsight, it is probably true that Booth had a hand in the crafting of the document. Booth sent copies to early political activists in Nyasaland—Filipo Chinyama and John Chilembwe. He also sent another copy to the *Nyasaland Times*, as well as to the British high commissioner in Cape-town and to be forwarded to Britain and also to the governor of Nyasaland, Sir William Henry Manning.

The signing and transmission of this petition were the seeds that informed the Nyasaland Insurgency led by John Chilembwe, who ran the Providence Industrial Mission he founded soon after returning to Nyasaland in 1900. Hostilities against colonial rule and settlers began on January 23, 1915. Filipo Chinyama leading 200 insurgents, attacked an armory in Ncheu District. Several plantations were attacked, and a number of European settlers were killed. Quick action by the authorities quelled the uprising. On February 3, 1915, the fleeing John Chilembwe, together with his nephew Morris Chilembwe, were shot dead by colonial police near Mulanje. Filipo Chinyama together with 40 insurgents, as well as Stephen Mkulichi, were executed. By March 31, 1915, some 300 insurgents were imprisoned for their role in the uprising.<sup>51</sup>

All the while, Nyambo was away in England, having left in May 1914 to seek an audience with the British monarch over his petition. Booth was with him. King George V did not see him, neither did British authorities recognize his presence in the country. Even as he waited for word from Buckingham Palace, Nyambo held meetings with various churches discussing the content of his petition and airing the grievances of the people of Nyasaland. When the hostilities broke out the following year in 1915, he was still in England and watched the unfolding events. Booth had returned to South Africa in 1914 and moved to Basutoland (now Lesotho) where he carried out plans for African economic development and education. Booth's clarion call at this time was "Africa for Africans," which would be picked up by the emerging nationalists across Africa.

Nyambo remained in England until 1917, and so the Chilembwe Uprising did not find him in Africa. Nonetheless, the main protagonists of the uprising were well known to him including Chilembwe himself who had been his housemate at the Booth home from 1897. Having severed ties with the Adventist Church, he began to have leanings toward the Ethiopian Orthodox religion (described then as Ethiopianism), but then in 1943 he founded the *Mpingo wa Makolo Acikuda* (Church of the African Ancestors) that morphed to the *Calici ca Makolo* (Church of the Ancestors).<sup>52</sup> According to Kalinga, this denomination was influenced by the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>53</sup>

Nyambo died in 1968.

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2. H. R. Salisbury, "British East Africa," *Missionary Worker*, June 6, 1906, 93.
3. Ibid.
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5. Ibid.
6. Kalinga, 89-90.
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9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
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12. Kalinga, 89-80.
13. Ibid., 373.
14. "The Opening of Duncombe College Hall," *Missionary Worker*, September 14, 1904, 152.
15. "Financial report of Conferences and Mission Fields," *Missionary Worker*, February 15, 1905, 28.
16. <https://www.in2013dollars.com/uk> (accessed June 15, 2021).
17. "Tract Work in North London," *Missionary Worker*, December 7, 1904, 200.
18. Ibid.

19. This was a freewill offering for Foreign Mission work collected each Sunday and turned in quarterly. The plan was inaugurated in 1887, continued for some years before being discontinued. (See *First-day offerings Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* [1996], s.v. "First-day Offerings.")
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27. E. E. Andross, "The British Union Conference," *ARH*, September 20, 1906, 19.
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35. Kalinga, *op cit*, p. 373
36. *General Conference Bulletin*, May 27, 1913, 158.
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39. Karin Pallaver, "A currency muddle: resistance, materialities and the local use of money during the East African rupee crisis (1919-1923)," *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 13/3 (2019), 546-564.
40. £1 of 100 pence was equivalent to 20s, then 1s was equivalent to 5 pence.
41. According to [www.in2013dollars.com/uk/](http://www.in2013dollars.com/uk/) £350 in 1906 is worth £43,654.07 in 2021 (accessed June 15, 2021). This is also equivalent to KSh. 6,638,838.94 as on June 15, 2021.
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