

Adventism and Culture in Southern Africa

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General Overview

Southern Africa today is a mix of people and cultures, with more than 50 countries and almost 1 billion (1,000,000,000) inhabitants. There is a diversity of languages, religions, political regimes, material conditions, housing styles, and different economic levels. Southern Africa is part of this multicultural continental landscape. African culture was strongly affected by colonial regimes. Throughout history, peoples and cultures have collided in the control of the region's great riches - gold, diamonds, ivory, land, and unfortunately, the people themselves. These peoples and cultures have been challenged to find ways to thrive and coexist.¹ Although there are numerous forms of worship, Islam, Christianity, and traditional religions are the main religious manifestations in southern Africa. The Christian religion is established in this context, influencing the cultural identity of the region, but also being influenced by it. Not only in the religious realm, but in the general culture as well, there is a syncretism (the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought) and a mixture of forms and beliefs, contents and meanings, values and concepts.²

African culture is strongly identified by its art, music, dance, cuisine, and spontaneous expressiveness of its people. Other practices and customs that are part of social and family life are also relevant in this context and reveal a specific and multifaceted worldview of the African people. In traditional Africa, the conception of the world is a conception of the relationship of natural, supernatural, human, and cosmic forces.³

There are social aspects in southern Africa that require attention since they establish themselves as a cultural pattern. Domestic violence against women and children, sexual abuse and rape, impunity, corruption, prejudice, discrimination, among others, are included.⁴ These are problems that impact the daily life of the population and seem not to be significantly addressed by religious entities in the country.

The Cultural Challenges to the Adventist Church in Southern Africa

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a global identity based on its fundamental beliefs, organizational and administrative system, and missionary vision. At the same time, Adventists seek to contextualize the Adventist message to make it understandable and relevant to local context.⁵

The rapid growth of the Church in some regions may necessitate the increase of this cultural adaptation. One important aspect in this observation is that the Gospel arrives within the cultural contexts, alters aspects that do not harmonize with the foundations of Christianity, and absorbs from culture some instruments of expression of faith. Despite the risk of religious-cultural syncretism, there is an inevitable exchange which, if duly directed, can contribute to the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

From this perspective, an analysis of the Adventist presence in some places must be made from the theological, ecclesiological, and missiological point of view.⁶ These three elements are distinct, but interchangeable and connected.⁷ An understanding of sociological and anthropological aspects can be helpful in gaining a proper and integrative view of these constituent phenomena of Adventism in southern African culture.⁸

There are different identifications of the countries of southern Africa. The United Nations identifies South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, and Namibia;⁹ the *Encyclopedia Britannica* adds Angola, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe;¹⁰ the SADC (Southern African Development Community) includes Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Tanzania.¹¹ For the purposes of this article, the 16 countries proposed by the SADC will be considered.

The Southern Africa Development Community has as its main objectives the promotion of economic growth and development; the reduction of poverty; the increase of the population's quality of life, peace, and security; sustainable development; and the strengthening and consolidation of affinities: cultural, historical, and social.

Southern Africa is multicultural. Due to the Bantu expansion, many African ethnic groups, including Xhosa, Zulu, Tsonga, Swazi, Northern Ndebele, South Ndebele, Tswana, Sotho, Shona, BaLunda, Mbundu, Ovimbundu, Chaga, and Sukuma, speak Bantu languages. The colonization process resulted in a significant population of European natives (Afrikaans, British, Portuguese Africans, etc.) and Asian ancestry in many southern African countries.¹²

Considering this cultural plurality of peoples in southern Africa, we cannot expect a single uniformity or definition of what may be termed "the African culture of this region." Similarly, this is found within Adventism in these countries. However, we can find common elements and have a global view of cultural aspects that are expressed through religious practices, daily life, and the conceptions of the faith of Adventists in the territory of southern Africa.

While living with local culture, the Adventist Church in southern Africa is influenced by the Adventist Church in Europe and America. This is due to the fact that the historical process of the formation of Adventism in Africa is basically the result of the action of European and American missionaries in this territory since 1887.¹³ In

addition, the administration of the Church has its headquarters in the United States, where theological orientations, ecclesiastical guidelines, and financial support also come from.¹⁴

There is a cultural reality in southern Africa that is sometimes poorly understood or misunderstood by the peoples of other continents.¹⁵ Myths and stereotypes are constructed from isolated samples and prejudices, although in a formal way the Church has parameters of good coexistence with cultural differences.¹⁶ It is possible that there are people who understand that it is necessary to rule for uniformity in the way of being Adventist, to maintain the unity and identity of the church.¹⁷

Due to the scope of cultural elements in southern Africa, it is necessary to outline some aspects of this culture to be considered here. Thus, the themes of worship, polygamy, dowry, and mysticism will be approached in a non-exhaustive manner. These themes have been chosen since they are on the agenda of many discussions among Christians in general as well as Adventists in southern Africa.¹⁸

Worship in Southern Africa

One of the great cultural challenges in southern Africa relates to religion and the forms of worship. Although Christianity is the predominant religion in most countries of this region, the way religion is expressed is strongly influenced by local culture. Research reveals this religious distribution in southern Africa: Protestant (19.4 percent), Christian Syncretic (16.0 percent), Pentecostal (10.9 percent), Catholic (8.6 percent), Ethnoreligionist (7.5 percent), not religious (including Atheist; 5.5 percent), other Religionist (3.6 percent), other and unknown Christian (23.0 percent), and unknown (5.5 percent).¹⁹

While the Church in southern Africa retains much of the traditional liturgical influence of the Church around the globe, it reveals regional aspects of culture in worship. Here we highlight two significant points in worship: The Word and the music. Although the physical expressions, prayers, and offering have special and distinctive characteristics in African worship, their relationship with message and music are more evident.

Adventist worship in southern Africa is neither only emotional nor syncretic. The Word is preached with consistency and profound biblical content.²⁰ The expressive form of many African Adventist preachers and the effusive response of congregation is reflected in the way of their being Africans in their daily experiences.

Another aspect is related to the way they read, understand, and interpret the Bible. African Adventists tend to have a more “literal and simple” view of the Bible, which does not mean less commitment with truth and theological totality of Scripture. It is possible that this characteristic is derived from the literalist similarity of the African culture with the Jewish culture, reflected in the biblical narrative.²¹ When the Word is preached in African culture, it tends to stress the pragmatic aspect of the message.

A decisive element in the worship and exposition of the Word derives from the African worldview. This holistic view does not distinguish the religious and spiritual aspects of elements of daily life. In this sense, the physical,

emotional, and spiritual elements are interconnected. Religion does not only deal with the cognitive aspect of human beings. It encompasses and involves the whole being, offering a holistic approach to life.²²

Despite the Protestant influence on the formation of the Adventist model of worship and the Adventist movement's having been constituted by people from several Christian religions existing in the 19th century, this liturgical and cultic inheritance receives the impact of cultures where the church is established.²³ There are fundamental elements that are conserved, but local elements are sometimes added. This phenomenon produces a diversity in the forms of worship that can generate admiration or concern.²⁴

Although the experience of salvation is strongly practiced in the African Adventist culture, it lacks more conceptualization to broaden its meanings. But this cognitive dimension can vary from person to person, depending on his cultural, social, and religious context in which they are inserted.²⁵

Racial differences can alter the form of worship within the same culture, and the people of the same race in different regions can have distinct forms of worship. Research indicates a strong cultural influence on Adventist worship in southern Africa. Therefore, it cannot be expected that whites, who prefer a relatively quiet and conservative atmosphere to worship, have the same experience of worship in a noisier group where the emotional atmosphere is clearly felt.²⁶

One of the points of evidence in the cultural difference of the Adventist Church in southern Africa is music. The Church's musical style receives cultural influence anywhere the Church is planted, but due to the characteristics of African music and its relationship with traditional systems, it is the target of questioning in and out of Africa. While the African Adventist Church retains traditional Adventist anthems, it inserts music with cultural elements in worship.

Within the same conception that involves worship, African Adventist music expresses the holistic vision in the adorer's experience. It deals with spiritual realities in a practical way, and it is related to daily living. The melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic construction reveals the perception of faith in a simple, tangible, and emotional way. The expressiveness in the daily communication of people carries in the form of Adventist religious music for worship.

Adventist music in southern Africa is basically influenced by three types of musical genres: 1. African indigenous music, also called traditional music, that dates back to pre-colonial times and survived European influence; 2. The contemporary African music, which settles on the rails of western music; and 3. The syncretic music, which has indigenous melody but is accompanied by instruments, harmonics, and polyphonic western arrangements.²⁷

A current concern about this musical influence is that African music is sometimes used as a means of communicating with ancestral spirits. Even in Africa, there are Adventists who have caveats about the use of this music. Body expressions, such as raising of hands and dances practiced by Adventists in Africa, have distinctive elements of the dances practiced in pagan rituals and in Pentecostal churches.²⁸

Therefore, the Adventist response to this cultural influence is to define some criteria to help in choosing songs for worship in African culture. Adventist music must be distinguished from secular music, must lead to a spiritual experience, must be Christocentric, must have quality, and should harmonize with the Adventist music philosophy.²⁹ Melody and rhythm should not take the focus of worship, harmony must be elaborated with high quality musical standards, and the lyrics must have poetic quality and biblical coherence.³⁰

The Issue of Polygamy in Southern Africa

With the Christian missionary expansion in Africa, the Church had to deal with polygamy. The Church has had to try to manage the issue of people and families who were polygamous prior to becoming Christians in a way that creates less social impact, fewer ecclesiastical problems, and fewer theological conflicts.³¹

In the territory of southern Africa as well as elsewhere on the African continent, polygamy is officially not accepted in the light of official church documents and votes. However, since Adventism came to Africa, it came across this social reality.³² Many meetings and committees took place to address the subject and set procedural guidelines, these decisions had different opinions and changed over time.³³

The implications of the polygamic culture for the Adventist Church are clear. Biblical comprehension evidences a monogamous position for marriage. Although there are people who try to justify or defend polygamy using biblical, social, and anthropological arguments, the Adventist Church has a signaled path on the topic.³⁴ Therefore, some ecclesiastical measures have been taken to deal with cases of people who accept the Gospel and find themselves in this situation.³⁵

As a general rule, it guides the man who has more than one wife to take one of them, preferably the first, and to support the others and their children so he can be baptized and become a member of the Church.³⁶ If he does not accept this proposal, he can continue in the Church, but without being baptized. In some places, he is accepted with his wives but cannot add another wife. Normally, the acceptance of people living in polygamy is only in the case of those who come to the Church in this situation, not for those who are already members.

As for women, the first wife is usually accepted as a member, but there are localities that accept all of them. It is also possible to find situations where all the people of these polygamic relationships have been baptized and accepted as members, especially in numerous baptisms of large evangelistic campaigns. In some churches, members who are part of a polygamy situation may not have positions and functions, especially if they are leadership positions.³⁷

Therefore, there is no single standard of Adventist Church procedure in southern Africa as to dealing with polygamy cases. Polygamy has complex cultural, family (as in the case of Levirate), and economic implications. With more than 30 percent of the population living in this condition, this is a challenge that passes through the social, theological, and ecclesiastical fields, but that has direct reflections on the missionary dimension of Church

because, when the message reaches people, it finds them in this situation.³⁸

Lobola - The Price of a Bride in Southern African Culture

The payment of dowry is an African tradition where a man pays a price for his bride, popularly called “Lobola”. It’s a negotiation involving two families and sometimes a negotiator. The agreement gives several marital rights to the bridegroom, including procreation. This is an African practice that finds no resistance in the Christian world although some see in its negative aspects, including the perception that women can be considered negotiable objects and that some families can use it as a source of income. It can turn into a kind of a license for men to abuse their wives.³⁹

Lobola can help unite two families and foster mutual respect. It can be an indication that the man is able to sustain his wife as well as reinforcing the idea of the commitment and seriousness of marriage. It is a demonstration of a man’s appreciation of the woman. Some consider the lack of payment of the dowry one of the reasons for marital crises and that Lobola is the expression of an ideal marriage because it indicates that the man assumes full responsibility for his wife.⁴⁰

In several regions of southern Africa, Lobola plays a very important role in sealing the marriage relationship. It is a legal procedure that validates the marriage and confirms the consent of the parents of the bride and groom. There are countries where marriage is not recognized as valid without the payment of the dowry. Payment may be charged before or after the wedding, but usually the dowry is paid by the family during the wedding. Parents and relatives of the bridegroom bring what they have put together to be delivered to the bridegroom's in-laws.⁴¹

There is a concern on the part of the Church, in some places, because the collection of the payment of the dowry creates a situation of difficulty for the realization of the marriage among poor young people. This factor increases the risk of fornication and throws many into a relationship of cohabitation without the commitment of marriage. To minimize this problem, the Church could guide the parents of the bride to make a possible reduction in the value of the payment of the dowry, help the parents of the bridegroom to pay the dowry, and promote a review of the rules governing the practice of Lobola.⁴²

Despite the questionings made by some about the validity and importance of the payment of dowry,⁴³ there are positive assessments in the personal, family, social, and evangelistic aspects. A survey conducted in Malawi demonstrated that in the northern region of the country, where the practice of Lobola is still preserved, the divorce index is lower than in the central and southern regions where the dowry is not paid on a regular basis.⁴⁴ Another research indicates that when the Church supports the payment of dowry, this favors the evangelistic movement of the Adventist Church in some indigenous regions of South Africa.⁴⁵

Traditional Religions in Southern Africa

One of the most expressive elements of African culture is the religiosity, whether animistic, spiritualist, Muslim, or Christian. The African worldview connects their beliefs with their daily activities, so the search for mystical entities helps in personal and collective situations, predict the future, and reveal secrets.

African traditional religion has no sacred scriptures. The teachings are transmitted orally from generation to generation. There are no formalities, no orthodoxy, no heresy because there are no creeds or dogmas. There are no missionary activities. It is a tolerant, flexible religion. It is intertwined with daily life and culture, and believes in ancestral spirits and the existence of a supreme being. African traditional religion is expressed in practical terms, with rituals, sacrifices, ceremonies, and many other visible manifestations.⁴⁶

Sorcerers, diviners, or family and tribal chiefs act as mediators between the people and the ancestral spirits, and these speak with the supreme being. For them, the religious rituals are not occasional, but demand the whole life which is permeated by spirits and the supernatural. The ancestral spirits are venerated and considered responsible for the good and bad things that happen in the world.⁴⁷ The gods can transmit strength to their followers so that they can face the challenges of life. A religion is measured by the power revealed to its followers.

Apart from the obvious differences between the African traditional religions and Christianity, there are also common points such as the belief in the existence of a higher being, the belief in a creator of all things, the belief in the existence of spiritual beings, the acceptance of people as spiritual leaders, the belief in atonement for God, the appreciation of family and community life, and the expectation of a life after death.⁴⁸

Religious dualism or syncretism is an acceptable option for many Africans. While conserving the beliefs of their African traditional religions, they also practice Christianity. They usually turn to the African traditional religion for help (e.g., diviners) when things do not go well in life. It seems that a part of life is out of the Gospel!⁴⁹ This problem challenges all Christians in Africa, not just Adventists.

The Church has taken some measures to diminish this problem in the formation of new believers by stressing the biblical foundation for spiritual experience of Jesus Christ's sovereign power. It is the power of God that gives victorious life over the powers of evil for believers in Jesus Christ.⁵⁰

It is a challenge for the Church to establish an Adventist identity in a universe built on African traditional religions. The Adventist Church in southern Africa has sought to act objectively to help members delink themselves from the beliefs and practices of the African traditional religions, but it may be that this process lasts many years.

Conclusion

When the Adventist Church arrived in southern Africa, it found Africa's richness and cultural diversity which, while challenging, also provided some opportunities for missionary expansion. Following the biblical guidelines

and principles that govern cross-cultural mission, the Church sought to conform to the African reality without compromising its essential values.

The influence of traditional religion in the southern Africa culture is perhaps one of the Church's greatest challenges. The way the Church in southern Africa has dealt with these problems leaves a clear lesson that cultural issues need not be an impediment to advancing the work, nor a reason for divisions in the Church, that the fundamentals of faith need not be violated as we immerse ourselves in different cultural contexts with the Adventist message.

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