

Kamakil, Robert (1920–2010)

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Robert Kamakil was a pioneer Adventist among the Pokot people of Kenya.

Robert Kamakil was born in 1920 in Mweno village in West Suk. His wealthy father, Kassiu, died before he was born and his mother, Chepogh, married his uncle Lokales in accordance to the Pokot tradition.¹ Even though his father was dead, Kamakil remained the rightful heir of his vast wealth. Lokales decided to kill the young Kamakil in order that he could take over all the wealth himself. One day as they crossed a mighty river, Lokales grabbed the ten-year old Kamakil and pushed him into the raging waters, hoping he would be carried away and die. His mother, who was observing nearby, jumped into the waters and saved him from drowning. She told him that he should leave immediately to avoid further harm from Lokales who seemed determined to kill him. She cooked a meal for him and packed him a lunch and put some milk in a gourd and bade him leave. He walked away not knowing where he was going. He walked for many days, exhausted his food supply, and began to eat roots, tubers, and wild fruit to survive.

One day he saw an abandoned house, and he was so hungry and exhausted that he entered hoping to find food, but instead he found empty tins, tools, and an axe that had been left behind by the previous occupants. In his hunger he fell down and slept for long hours. As he slept, a large venomous snake crept into the room and with a sharp snap bit him in one of his fingers. He was awakened by the sharp pain and noticed the snake slithering away. His hand began to swell from the poison. There was nothing he could do other than chop off the bitten finger. He reached for the axe with one hand and placed the finger on the table and with a quick strike, chopped off his bitten finger. That quick action saved his life and, more critically, bought him some time to get help.

Shortly afterwards, some Europeans, who had been there earlier and left their things in the hut, returned. They noticed the bleeding boy who lay dying and quickly rushed him to the nearest hospital. Kamakil had walked so far from home and had lost his sense of direction. It turned out that he was at Kacheliba in northern Pokot country. He was admitted at the CMS Mission hospital at Kacheliba and underwent surgery to save his life. He stayed in the hospital for several months. He remained at the mission and started his education there. They treated him as an orphan and placed him at the Kacheliba CMS School. He was educated to the Intermediate level, leaving school at Standard IV. After staying for many months in a hospital, he decided that he should join

the medical service in order to save more lives.

In 1939 at the start of the World War, he trained as a medical assistant and joined the armed forces to help in the war effort. In 1943 he was shipped to Burma where he treated many of the wounded soldiers. After the war, in 1945 he returned to Kenya and the following year he got a job as a “dresser” in the Kapenguria Hospital. He settled on a sizeable portion of land, about 60 acres near the hospital, and in 1946 he married Ellen Tatya. In September 1947, their first son, Abraham Kamakil, was born. In 1950 Loise followed, then Wilson in 1952, and Josiah in 1956.

Kamakil became an Adventist in 1953. He was treating some patients at the Kapenguria Hospital when Pastor Jackson Maiyo, the pioneer Adventist Nandi pastor, came to visit with some patients. When he began to share the Word with them and pray, Kamakil heard something that he had not heard before. He listened carefully as the pastor spoke to the patients and even joined them to listen. Afterwards Kamakil approached the pastor, curious about his message. He was invited to his home to hear more. Pastor Maiyo shared the Word into the wee hours of the morning. The following day Kamakil gave his life to Christ and became the first Pokot to accept the Adventist message.

Kamakil then decided to approach the district commissioner Alexander David Shirreff asking to be allowed to establish a church in the town of Kapenguria. Shirreff was completely against the idea of an Adventist church being established in the West Pokot district and he threw Kamakil out of his office. Undeterred, Kamakil contacted the Adventist European missionaries Pastors L. D. Browne and D. L. Ringering, who in May 1956 tried to convince Shirreff, but he would not consider it.²

That same year Kamakil quit his job at the hospital and moved to the European settled areas to work as a foreman. He happened to work at the farm of a rather difficult boss at Maili Nne. Pastor Jackson Maiyo met with him there and convinced him to relocate to Nandi. Kamakil decided that he would first take a job at Hoey's Bridge (now Moi's Bridge) before moving to Nandi. He worked there briefly before moving with his family to Kapkeringon in northern Nandi, becoming part of the vibrant Adventist community there. Pastor Maiyo baptized Ellen Tatya at the river in Kapkeringon. Kamakil enrolled his children in Sigot Primary School.

After settling his family in Nandi, Kamakil went to Kamagambo to train to become a pastor. He then returned and became a preacher, moving from place to place and deepening the Adventist work in Nandi. This was all in preparation for returning to Kapenguria, 100 miles north, with the Adventist message. He moved his family to Kimolwet, not far from Kapkeringon, where he continued to preach bringing more people to Christ. Two of Kamakil's children were born in Nandi, Julia in 1958 and Risper in 1963 while at Kimolwet.

It was while at Kimolwet that word reached him that his land at Kapenguria had been taken over by someone who now claimed to be the rightful owner. Kenya's Independence was coming and many things were changing. Kamakil decided to move his family back to Kapenguria. On reaching Kapenguria, they found that indeed his land had been taken over and the man would not budge. Kamakil did not create a scene and patiently and

consistently asked the man to let him have his land back. Eventually Kamakil got his land and constructed a new home for his family.

Eight years after Shirreff had turned away the Adventists, Kamakil now got his consent to establish an Adventist church in West Pokot. In 1964 Kamakil organized the first Adventist church at Kapenguria township, a short distance from his home. He became the elder in the new church and the foremost evangelist in the area, bringing in people to the church. For a number of years the church grew, with many civil servants working at the district headquarters becoming members. His wife Ellen was active in the church, working for the Dorcas Society or what is today the Women's Ministries.

Kamakil worked hard to deepen the Adventist message in the vast West Pokot district. The church at Kapenguria began to flourish with Siyoi becoming its first company. Others soon followed including Kamatira and Makutano Central, Keringet and Tartar. Other churches that have grown from this church include Kesogon, Karaus, Komol, Ekegoro, Tumaini, Kesogon Central, Siyoi B, Cape of Hope, Talau, Konyao, and Chepkechir.

Ellen Tatya died December 6, 2002, after being ill for a while. She was survived by her husband and their seven children led by Abraham Kamakil who at that time was a high ranking government official in Kenya. Robert Kamakil died January 29, 2010, and was laid to rest beside his wife in a funeral service that was attended by thousands who knew him.

Source

PC/NKU/2/23/7 Kenya National Archives. Nairobi, Kenya.

Sang, Godfrey K. and Hosea K. Kili, *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*. Nairobi, Kenya: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017.

NOTES

1. Information in this article has been adapted from the following book coauthored by the author of this article: Godfrey K. Sang, and Hosea K. Kili, *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya* (Nairobi, Kenya: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017).
2. PC/NKU/2/23/7 Kenya National Archives, Nairobi, Kenya.

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