

Rites of Passage and Seventh-day Adventists in Ghana

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Overview of the Issue

In various cultures and traditions, rites of passage mark major transitions in human life and commonly connect individual identity with family, community, moral obligation, and religious meaning. In Ghana, birth and naming, transition to adulthood, marriage, death, and burial have historically been surrounded by ceremonies that vary among Akan, Ga-Dangme, Ewe, Krobo, and other communities. Some elements are primarily social, while others invoke ancestors, deities, or spiritual powers. Because Ghanaian social life frequently joins religion, kinship, and communal identity, Christian converts may encounter rites that contain both culturally valued practices and religious meanings that conflict with their convictions.¹

The Seventh-day Adventist response in Ghana has developed within this cultural setting. Adventism took organized root in the Gold Coast through [Francis I. U. Dolphijn](#) and other Sabbath keepers at Apam and through the arrival of the first official missionaries, Karl G. Rudolph and Edward Leroy Sanford, on February 22, 1894. From its beginnings, the movement brought teachings on the Sabbath, baptism, Christian marriage, the state of the dead, health, and exclusive worship of God into conversation with established social customs.²

The central issue is therefore not whether Ghanaian Adventists participate in culture. They do. Ghanaian languages, dress, music, family networks, customary marriage negotiations, respect for elders, community solidarity, and the public acknowledgment of major life events are compatible with Adventist life when they do not require religious acts contrary to Adventist belief. The difficulty arises where a rite is understood to involve invocation of ancestors or deities, divination, sacrifice to spiritual beings, religious obligations incompatible with Sabbath observance, or marital arrangements inconsistent with the Church's understanding of marriage.

Adventist practice in Ghana consequently reflects selection, adaptation, avoidance, and the development of Christian ceremonies rather than a uniform rejection of Ghanaian culture.

Origins of Adventist Response

Adventist engagement with rites of passage in Ghana emerged gradually as the Church expanded from the coast into Akan and other communities. The earliest converts entered a Church whose teachings required visible changes in weekly worship, diet, family life, and understandings of death. As congregations became rooted in local communities, members continued to belong to extended families in which naming ceremonies, marriages, funerals, and other life-cycle events were important expressions of social solidarity. The resulting pastoral questions were therefore not abstract. They concerned whether and how Adventists could remain responsible members of their families while declining ritual acts they understood as incompatible with Scripture.³

This tension can be understood against the religious significance often attached to Ghanaian rites of passage. Arnold van Gennep's classic analysis of rites of passage describes ceremonies that accompany movement from one social status to another. Ghanaian scholarship and ethnography show that such transitions may also express ideas about lineage, fertility, adulthood, authority, the ancestors, and the continuity of the community. Among the Akan, for example, outdooring and naming publicly incorporate a child into family and social life. Among the Krobo, dipo has historically marked female transition toward adulthood, while Akan puberty observances such as bragoro have similarly combined instruction, social recognition, and ritual symbolism. The precise forms have changed over time and differ by locality, family, and religious affiliation.

Marriage rites likewise connect more than two individuals. Customary processes may include negotiations between families, presentation of gifts, bridewealth or 'head drink,' public acknowledgment of the union, and obligations between kin groups. These practices should not automatically be classified as non-Christian. Their religious significance depends on what is done and what meaning participants assign to it.⁴ Libation or explicit invocation of ancestors presents a different question from family negotiation, gift exchange, or cultural clothing.

⁵ This distinction between social form and religious meaning has become important for Adventists seeking to honor family relationships without participating in worship directed to beings other than God.

Death and funeral customs create especially intense pressures because funerals in Ghana are major family and community events. Among Akan communities, funerals may involve elaborate announcements, donations, mourning practices, public display, and extensive expenditure. Sjaak van der Geest's research in Kwahu shows that funerals also concern family reputation, reciprocity, respect, and social standing, not only beliefs about the dead. Both the religious meanings traditionally associated with death and the ways Adventist teaching has influenced funeral practice in Ghana.⁶

Birth, Naming, and Child Dedication

Traditional outdoorings and naming ceremonies vary across Ghana but commonly introduce a newborn publicly to family and community. In some Akan settings, the ceremony has included libation or symbolic actions interpreted in relation to ancestors and the spiritual world. Adventist families generally retain the social value of welcoming and naming a child while avoiding acts that they understand as ancestor invocation, divination, or worship. The Church's child-dedication service offers a distinctly Christian setting in which parents and congregation pray for the child and affirm responsibility for Christian nurture. Child dedication is not baptism and does not confer church membership or saving status.⁷

It is more accurate to describe dedication as a Christian life-cycle practice that may accompany or reshape family acknowledgment of a child's birth than as a universal Adventist replacement for Ghanaian outdoorings. Families may still gather relatives, announce the child's name, wear traditional clothing, share food, and recognize kinship relationships. The pastoral question is whether particular ritual elements carry religious meanings inconsistent with Adventist commitment. This distinction allows the Church to affirm family solidarity and Ghanaian identity while directing worship and prayer to God alone.

Puberty, Youth Formation, and Baptism

Puberty rites such as Akan *bragoro* and Krobo *dipo* have historically marked the transition of girls toward socially recognized adulthood. Marijke Steegstra's study of *dipo* emphasizes that the rite has also become a contested and changing cultural institution rather than a single fixed practice. Elements of puberty rites may involve moral instruction, family recognition, dress, performance, seclusion, fertility symbolism, or religious invocation. Adventist families therefore do not face one uniform ceremony but a range of local forms whose meanings require discernment.⁸

Adventist baptism should not be treated as a denominational substitute for puberty rites. In official Adventist belief, baptism is a confession of faith in Christ, a symbol of death to sin and new life, and the means by which a believing person is received into Church membership after biblical instruction and repentance. Its meaning is theological rather than biological or ethnic. Nevertheless, Adventist youth ministries, baptismal preparation, mentoring, and public recognition of young people's growing responsibilities can perform some of the social and educational functions that communities expect around transition to maturity without reproducing ritual elements that members regard as incompatible with Christian worship.⁹

Marriage and Family Rites

Adventists understand marriage as a lifelong union between a man and a woman in loving companionship and teach that Christian marriage is a commitment to God as well as to the spouse.¹⁰ In Ghana, this understanding

interacts with customary marriage systems in which families participate actively in establishing and recognizing the union. Customary negotiation, family consent, bridewealth, and exchange of gifts are not in themselves incompatible with Adventist belief. Conflict arises when marriage rites require acts of worship, divination, ancestor invocation, or practices contrary to the Church's understanding of marriage and Christian discipleship.

Polygamy has been one of the most difficult points of encounter between African marriage systems and Adventist policy. The Church presents monogamy as the biblical ideal while recognizing that converts may enter the Church from pre-existing polygamous households. Adventist policy on such cases developed through decades of mission experience and seeks to uphold monogamous marriage while reducing harm to spouses and children. The subject is more complex than the claim that every polygamous convert is simply required to "divorce all wives except the first." Adventist treatment of polygamy in Africa documents the historical development and pastoral qualifications of the policy.¹¹

For Adventist couples in Ghana, a church wedding may follow civil or customary processes and provides a Christian service of Scripture, prayer, vows, and pastoral blessing. It should therefore be understood as one component of a marriage recognized within overlapping civil, customary, family, and ecclesiastical systems, not as the sole event that creates social legitimacy. Pastoral practice is strongest when it helps families distinguish cultural practices that express respect and kinship from religious acts that a Christian couple cannot conscientiously perform.

Death, Funerals, and the State of the Dead

Funerals are the area in which the theological difference between Adventism and some traditional Ghanaian understandings is most visible. Seventh-day Adventists teach that death is an unconscious state until the resurrection and that the dead do not communicate with, bless, curse, or mediate for the living. The Church therefore rejects necromancy and religious practices that presuppose communication with the dead.¹² This teaching provides the principal doctrinal basis for Adventist reservations about libation directed to ancestors, sacrifices intended for the dead, and rites designed to secure an ancestor's protection or safe transition.

At the same time, Adventist funerals share important social purposes with Ghanaian funerals: honoring the deceased, supporting bereaved families, gathering relatives and community members, remembering a life, and providing public space for grief. Adventist services normally emphasize Scripture, prayer, Christian hope, and the resurrection. Adventist research on West African burial customs notes that Ghanaian Adventists have also adjusted funeral timing in response to Sabbath observance, illustrating how Christian conviction and local custom interact in practical ways.¹³

The greatest pastoral difficulty often occurs not in the church service but in extended-family events over which an Adventist member has limited control. A member may attend a funeral organized by non-Adventist relatives

where libation or other traditional rites occur. Attendance does not necessarily indicate participation in every ritual act. Pastors and families therefore need to distinguish presence for reasons of kinship and condolence from active performance or endorsement of religious acts. Such distinctions are important in a society where absence from a funeral can be interpreted as rejection of family obligations.

Libation, Ancestors, and Cultural Discernment

Libation is particularly significant because it illustrates why the category “culture” cannot be treated as religiously neutral in every circumstance. Robert Owusu Agyarko’s study of Ghanaian Christian debates shows that Akan theologians themselves differ over whether, and in what forms, Christian participation in libation can be reconciled with Christian faith. Adventist objections center on the object and meaning of the invocation: prayer or offerings addressed to ancestors, deities, or spirits conflict with the Church’s teaching on worship and the state of the dead.¹⁴

This does not require Adventists to reject every ceremony at which libation has traditionally occurred. A family gathering, naming celebration, marriage negotiation, or funeral can contain elements that are culturally meaningful without being acts of worship. The practical task is to identify which actions can be retained, which can be reinterpreted without misrepresentation, and which must be declined. In this respect, the Adventist response in Ghana belongs to a wider African Christian conversation about contextualization: cultural belonging is affirmed, but religious meanings are evaluated in the light of Scripture and denominational teaching.

Continuity, Accommodation, and Pastoral Role

The lived experience of Ghanaian Adventists does not always fit neatly into policy categories. Members may face pressure from parents, lineage elders, chiefs, or other relatives to participate in ceremonies whose religious meanings they question. Others may interpret the same act mainly as cultural respect. Historical studies of Ghanaian Adventism continually describe tensions surrounding traditional practices across African Adventism.¹⁵ Such evidence supports a description of ongoing negotiation rather than simply assuming an existence of widespread secret ritual participation or “dual belonging” for which there is no valid direct contemporary evidence.

The Church’s pastoral response is therefore most effective when it moves beyond simple prohibition. Early teaching can help members anticipate the religious content of naming ceremonies, puberty observances, marriage negotiations, and funerals before conflict arises. Pastors can also work with families to identify alternative forms that preserve respect, hospitality, communal support, moral instruction, and remembrance. When members have already participated in disputed practices, pastoral care requires careful inquiry into what they actually did and intended rather than treating attendance at a cultural event as equivalent to worship of another deity.

Ghanaian Adventism also demonstrates that contextualization is not merely the adoption of traditional rituals. The use of Ghanaian languages, indigenous musical forms, local dress, family participation, storytelling, community hospitality, and culturally recognizable ceremonies can root Adventist faith deeply in local life. The critical question is whether a practice communicates meanings consistent with Christian worship, human dignity, biblical ethics, and Adventist belief. This approach avoids both indiscriminate rejection of Ghanaian culture and uncritical incorporation of practices whose religious claims conflict with the faith community.

Lessons

Several lessons emerge from the Adventist encounter with rites of passage in Ghana. First, rites of passage must be interpreted locally. Ghana contains multiple peoples and changing urban and rural settings, and no single description of Akan, Krobo, Ga-Dangme, Ewe, or other practice should be generalized to the whole country. Historical ethnographies remain valuable, but contemporary practice may differ considerably from early 20th-century descriptions.

Second, social participation and religious participation should be distinguished. Naming a child, honoring elders, negotiating a marriage, wearing traditional clothing, contributing to a funeral, or gathering with extended family may express belonging rather than competing worship. Conversely, invocation of deities or ancestors, divination, sacrificial acts directed to spiritual beings, and practices that explicitly contradict Adventist teaching raise theological concerns even when culturally customary. This distinction gives pastors and members a more precise basis for decision than the broad labels “traditional” or “Christian.”

Third, Adventist alternatives are strongest when they address the social purposes of the rites they modify. Child dedication can affirm parental responsibility and communal support; youth discipleship can provide moral formation and belonging; Christian marriage services can honor both covenant and family relationships; and funerals can combine grief, remembrance, social solidarity, and hope of resurrection. Alternatives that attend only to doctrinal prohibition may leave significant family and communal needs unanswered.

Fourth, the doctrine of death and resurrection has particular importance for funeral practice. Because Adventists regard the dead as unconscious until the resurrection, prayer to ancestors and ritual efforts to influence the postmortem condition of the deceased are incompatible with Adventist belief. Yet the same doctrine also supports compassionate funeral ministry by directing attention to grief, memory, the care of survivors, and hope in Christ's return rather than fear of the dead.

Finally, the Ghanaian experience shows that the Church's relationship with rites of passage is best described as continuing cultural discernment. Adventism has neither simply replaced Ghanaian culture nor accepted every inherited form. Across birth, maturation, marriage, and death, members and leaders seek ways to remain recognizably Ghanaian while ordering worship and religious allegiance according to Adventist convictions. The continuing task is to document these negotiations more fully through interviews, congregational records, and

regional studies so that pastoral guidance is based not only on inherited descriptions but also on the lived experience of contemporary Ghanaian Adventists.

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