Maswai, Ezekiel Kimenjo (1897–1972)

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Ezekiel Kimenjo Maswai was the foremost Adventist evangelist and leader in the formative years of the denomination among the Nandi people of western Kenya.
Early Life

Ezekiel Kimenjo araap Maswai was born at Kapeywa, in Tinderet, southern Nandi, around 1897. His father was a member of the Kapchepkendi, a subtribe of the Nandi of western Kenya. In 1906 the British removed the Nandi from Tinderet northwards to the Kabiyyet area. Kimenjo was among the group that was relocated. At the onset of the First World War, he joined the King’s African Rifles (KAR) and fought for the British in the period between 1914 and 1919. After the war he became one of the first people to join the Africa Inland Mission at Kapsabet in Nandi county. Here he began his education and was baptized as a member of that denomination and given the name Ezekiel. Afterwards, the mission trained him as an evangelist and sent him to work among the Nandi. In 1922 he married Esther who had also been a member of the mission at Kapsabet. Together they had a daughter.

Becoming an Adventist

One day in 1926 the European missionary at Kapsabet, William Mundy, asked Ezekiel to go to Luo Nyanza to “counter” teachings by the Seventh-day Adventists who were converting members of their mission among the Luo people. The area of south Nyanza had first been entered by Arthur Carscalleden and Peter Nyambo in 1906 at Gendia, and by the 1920s the Adventists were busy evangelizing northwards. Kimenjo happily went there and began teaching earnestly against the Adventists. However, those listening to him asked him deep biblical questions he was unable to answer. They asked about the Sabbath and other doctrinal pillars of Adventism, leaving him dumbfounded. He asked for more time to offer a reasonable argument, but he soon realized that there was so much about the Bible that he did not understand. After agreeing to be taught more, it was not long before he made the decision to become an Adventist.1

Return to Nandi and Early Evangelistic Work

When he returned to Kapsabet he tried to reconnect with his old mission, but he was expelled as soon as it became apparent that he had adopted a new faith. Not long afterwards his wife Esther became seriously ill. He took her to the Kaimosi hospital run by Quaker missionaries, but she died, leaving behind their only child. Leaving the child in the care of relatives, he returned to Gendia where he had become friends with Pastor Paul Mboya, Kenya’s first African Adventist pastor. Mboya continued to study with him regarding biblical truths. He was baptized into the faith in 1928 at Gendia. It was here that he began his evangelism and was trained to conduct literature evangelism. Through Pastor George S. Maxwell, president of the East Africa Union, Kimenjo was sent to Eldoret to connect with David Sparrow who had already brought to the faith about two dozen Nandis and was holding regular Sabbath services on his farm.2 It was here that he met pioneers of the faith, including Caleb Kipkessio araap Busienei, who was the first Nandi to accept the Adventist faith.

Moving to Kaigat

After worshipping at the Sparrow farm for a while, Kimenjo and some other believers felt it was time to reach into the Nandi Reserve. In the year 1930, at the urging of David Sparrow and the congregation on the farm, Kimenjo looked for a suitable place on the Nandi Reserve to establish a church. He arrived at Kimolwet, some 12 miles away from the Sparrow farm. Here he met an old friend, Chebotok araap Terer, and told him of his mission. Terer advised him to go to the Kaigat area which was north of where they were. The following day he arrived at Kaigat and indeed the location was most ideal, with well-watered and fertile soil. In 1931 they built a church and began holding regular Sabbath services there. After much struggle with the authorities who were most reluctant to grant the Adventists an operating license, permission came in 1933 from the district commissioner Keith L. Hunter who was due to leave Nandi shortly. With the help of David Sparrow and William Cuthbert, a new church was established and the congregants on the Sparrow farm moved there. In August 1933 superintendent of the East Africa Union, Spencer Maxwell, traveled to Kaigat and presided over the dedication of the church.3 He immediately appointed Ezekiel Kimenjo as a credentialed missionary in charge of the Kaigat church and the unentered areas of the Kabras in North Nyanza. Kimenjo appears in the 1934 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook as a Missionary Licentiate of the North-West Kenya Mission. He was given a wage of Sh. 12 a month which was increased to Sh. 16 beginning July 1, 1933.4

Intense evangelistic work resulted in tremendous growth of the church. In 1935 Kimenjo married Rebecca Jeptepkeny at Kaigat and started a family. In 1936, H. A. Matthews was sent by Maxwell to assist in Kimenjo’s evangelistic work. He also sent another worker, Mariko Otieno. Ezekiel Kimenjo and Otieno continued their work in the Kaigat area and the Kabras region through the rest of 1936, but in July 1937 Otieno was discharged from duty, leaving Kimenjo as the sole African worker in the region. Kimenjo was now working largely with H. A. Matthews.

Moving to Samitui

In 1941 the congregants at Kaigat agreed to disperse to various places in Nandi in order to spread the faith to the furthest reaches of the district. Kimenjo was bidden to go to Samitui, the southern-most tip of Nandi also referred to as “Chelemei” by the Nandi. This was the traditional seat of his Kapchepkendi people. When he arrived, Ezekiel was given the land once owned by the famous diviner Orgoiyot, or Laibon Kimnyolei araap Turugat. Knowing that he was...
peddling a foreign religion they did not want, they were sure that Maswai was going to die by setting foot on the land. Kimnyolei had been stoned to death by a group of rebellious Nandi warriors who defied his prophecy not to go on a cattle-raiding party. His lands were abandoned altogether from fear that anyone who would settle there would be taken by the curses he had placed on his people. When Kimenjo asked if he could live among them, the Nandi of Samitui readily gave him Kimnyolei’s land, hoping that he would soon be dead and leave them in peace. However, knowing the Almighty God as his Protector, Kimenjo agreed to live on the land and commenced mission work there. He constructed a home on top of the ruins of Kimnyolei’s homestead which had not been occupied since 1890. Villagers waited with bated breath for calamity to strike. Nothing happened. Kimenjo went from house to house, painstakingly teaching each of them the Bible truths. The power of the Holy Spirit was moving and soon Kimenjo’s worst critics were attracted to the Adventist faith. His home at Samitui became the first church, and after a while a good number of people joined the new church and soon there was need to move to another site.

Maswai then embarked on getting a license to build a church, but first he had to convince the local elders. On January 14, 1947, the area chief, Joseph araap Keny of Kibwareng, wrote to the district commissioner stating that the elders at Samitui had consented to have the Adventist church built there. Maswai took the letter all the way to Chebwa Mission whereupon D. M. Swaine wrote a letter to the district commissioner dated February 3, 1947, and attaching the earlier one, gave it to Maswai to give to the district commissioner. The matter came before the LNC and Maswai was finally granted a license and a plot on which to construct his church some six years after he had settled at Samitui. The church now relocated to the new plot.

Kimenjo’s Work in Nandi

Kimenjo was not content to remain in Samitui but considered the whole of Nandi as his mission field. He preached on a daily basis throughout much of Nandi, often traveling on foot; and when he could get a lift from trucks, he would travel further. By 1954 the Cheplabot SDA Church was established about 12 miles from Samitui. Soon followed the Koyo SDA Church in an area which was already a stronghold of the Anglican Church. At Koyo, the early converts included Elder Musa araap Chelugui of Kiptamok Village. Together with others, they extended the church as far south as Chemase and Seana. From Cheplabot, the word spread further to Kipkuti, Kapsaos, Chepkiwen, Kaptumo, Mosomboor, Teldet in Chepkong’ony, and Kamarich—all of which now have churches. There are numerous Sabbath Schools including Kapchemosin, Sikisik, Mugundoi, Kipsiorori, and others.

Kimenjo Moves to Kipsigis Country

In 1950 Kimenjo was thrown out of Samitui for standing his ground in a traditional case where he challenged the ruling against him for protesting a female circumcision rite. He won the case that dragged on for a while but, as a compromise, the church authorities asked him to move to another area following the deep hostilities against him. Kimenjo was sent to Kebeneti to the church founded by Stephen araap Biomdo. He was personally received by Stephen who had put together a team of oxen to haul Ezekiel’s belongings. Together with his sons, they towed Ezekiel’s possessions to his prepared dwelling. He moved there with his young family and he continued pastoring there, and at Marumbasi, and finally at Kabokyek. He opened new churches in many areas and brought many souls to Christ. Ezekiel’s years of exile in Kipsigis country would come to an end in 1959 when he retired from denominational employment and was replaced by Pastor Enoch araap Keino. Ezekiel returned to Nandi since the hostilities that had led to his departure had subsided. He returned to Samitui, but continued to organize new congregations and preach through northern Nandi and even to the former settled areas.

The Death of Ezekiel

Ezekiel araap Maswai conducted his final camp meeting in August 1969 at Kapcheplanget in Ziwa in Uasin Gishu. He held his hand above the congregation and bid them a farewell, telling them that this would most probably be the last time they would be together. He told them that if they didn’t meet again on earth then they should meet in the new Kingdom. He urged the congregation to make sure that each of them would be with him on the resurrection morning. Many people were moved to tears at his words in what seemed to be the end of an era. He also pointed out across the ridge telling those present that there was a need for a church and a school to be built on yonder land. The land he had pointed to was the home of Arthur Cecil Hoey, the famous settler farmer, and it was up for sale. Upon that land now lies Segero Adventist Church and Segero Adventist High School established in 1976. It is one of the largest Adventist high schools in the world, with more than seven campuses spread throughout the area.

Ezekiel passed away quietly in his sleep on July 5, 1972. He was laid to rest two days later in a funeral attended by thousands who owed their faith to him. He was survived by Rebecca and their five children Eglah, Mishael, David, and twins John and Mary. Rebecca passed away in 1999.

Sources


*The Advent Survey*. Vol. 5 No. 11, November 1933, Northern European Division.

**NOTES**


2. Ibid.


4. *The Advent Survey*, vol. 5 no. 11, November 1933, Northern European Division.


6. Minutes of the East Africa Union Committee held at Kamagambo May 28-31, 1933 (Session no. 139) (Archived at the East Kenya Union offices in Nairobi).

7. As narrated by Simeon K. araap Kirui late of Kipsiorori Village, Kaboi location of Kaptumo, Nandi on diverse dates between 1993 and 1997, and also from the interviews and writings of Kipchoge araap Chomu a great grandson of Turugat.


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