

Ndlovu, Chief Mlevu (c.1840–1925)

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Chief Mlevu Ndlovu was a traditional leader of the Kalanga people and a trustworthy friend of the Adventist pioneers of Solusi Mission in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).



Chief Mlevu with Elder E.E. Andross at Solusi in 1919.

From Michael M. Sparrow Collection.

Encountering Adventism

One of the first people the Adventist missionaries encountered at Solusi when they arrived in 1894 was Chief Mlevu Ndlovu. After the Adventists had received a letter from Cecil Rhodes for a grant of land at Bulawayo, they traveled all the way eventually arriving on July 4, 1894, on land near Chief Soluswe's *kraal*.¹ In that team were Pieter Wessels, A. Druillard, Fred Sparrow, A. Goepp, E. J. Harvey, I. B. Burton, and J. Landsman.²

The leader of the mission was Fred Sparrow, a South African of British descent who came with his wife and baby. They measured out their allotment of 12,600 acres of land which would be the new Adventist mission. The land that had been allocated to the Adventists was already occupied by the Kalanga people, as well as the Ndebele, the former being the majority.³ On the ground to receive them was the Kalanga chief named Mlevu, who became friendly with the Adventists and helped them to settle in.

Saving the Mission

The missionaries had hardly settled on their land when the second Matabele Rebellion broke out. Early in 1896, the Ndebele staged an uprising against the coming Europeans. The Ndebele spiritual leader, Umlimu, had convinced his people that the Europeans were responsible for the drought, the outbreak of Rinderpest, and a

locust invasion that had plagued the land.⁴ Chief Mlevu Ndlovu gave the mission advance warning of the impending attack. At first the missionaries did not think themselves to be in danger, knowing that they had friendly relations with the local Kalanga people and the Ndebele as well. But then Chief Mlevu Ndlovu approached George Byron Tripp Sr., the leader of the mission (who had taken over from Fred Sparrow) and warned him that an attack was imminent. In March 1896, when hostilities broke out, the Ndebele killed a number of Europeans as they advanced toward the mission. It soon became apparent that the mission had to be evacuated.

On April 22, 1896, the Adventist missionaries fled for safety in Bulawayo and, on the way, they narrowly missed a Ndebele column led by Mayanza, a rebel chief, who blockaded the road just after the missionaries had gone.⁵ Had they tarried a little while longer, they might not have made it. Had Chief Mlevu Ndlovu not warned the missionaries about the attack, disaster would certainly have befallen them. The missionaries believed they owed their lives to him.⁶

Chief Mlevu Ndlovu did his best to protect the mission property, hiding part of it underground and other items in a nearby cave. When the attackers came, they found the place virtually deserted, but they made off with about 100 cows belonging to the mission.⁷ A military fort that had been installed on the mission property served to keep the attackers away.⁸ Some of the foodstuff that Chief Mlevu Ndlovu hid in the caves came in handy for the mission once the conflict was over. They sold the food in Bulawayo and the money would tide them over for a while.⁹

Chief Mlevu Ndlovu's homestead was about a mile and a half from the Solusi Mission property and he lived there with his three wives and children.¹⁰ He accepted the Adventist message and faithfully attended the church at Solusi, but was never baptized, perhaps because he was reluctant to give up his additional wives!¹¹ He remained close to the missionaries, even seeking their help to hunt down a leopard that had killed his goats in 1914, the result of which was a dramatic search for and killing of the offending animal!¹² He received important Adventist visitors, including General Conference vice president for North America, E. E. Andross, who visited him in 1919.¹³

Chief Mlevu Ndlovu died on October 7, 1925, and was laid to rest at the Solusi cemetery,¹⁴ next to the pioneer missionaries he had personally received three decades earlier. In November 1965, during the 70th Anniversary of the founding of Solusi, his son Harry Mlevu Ndhlovu unveiled a plaque to commemorate his father.¹⁵ A road at the Solusi campus is also named after him.

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NOTES

1. *Kraal* is an enclosure for cattle or other livestock, located within a Southern African settlement or village surrounded by a fence of thorn-bush branches, a palisade, mud wall, or other fencing, roughly circular in form. ("Kraal," *Wikipedia*, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kraal>.)
2. W. H. Anderson, "Pioneering the Work in South Africa," *The African Division Outlook*, July 25, 1929, 8.
3. Alberto Sbacchi, "First Seventh-day Adventist Mission in Africa," *Adventist Heritage: A Journal of Adventist Heritage*, July 1, 1977, 41.
4. "Second Matabele War," *Wikipedia*, accessed June 8, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Matabele_War.
5. Sbacchi, 41.
6. Anderson, 8.
7. Sbacchi, 41.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. O. Montgomery, "Solusi Mission and Camp Meeting," *ARH*, October 8, 1931, 22.
11. *Ibid.*
12. W. C. Walston, "Leopard Hunt at Solusi," *Southern Africa Missionary*, October 26, 1914, 4.
13. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (1919), 5.

14. S. W. Palmer, "Solusi Mission Notes," *African Division Outlook*, November 15, 1925, 14.

15. "Solusi's 70th Anniversary," *Trans-Africa Division Outlook*, January 15, 1964, 5.

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