

Adventists and Maasai Culture

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The Maasai people live in the southern part of Kenya and northern part of Tanzania in east Africa. It is estimated that one million Maasai people live in Kenya and Tanzania, although most Maasai doubt these numbers. Many Maasai see the national census as government meddling and often miscount their numbers to census takers. This tribe is well known for being strong in preserving its culture.¹

When the early western missionaries came to the Maasai territory they did not respect the Maasai culture. They appeared to have perceived nothing of value in the culture. Unfortunately, this seemed to have been a common practice among almost all the missionaries, including Adventist missionaries, who came to the African continent. All of the 11 participants who were interviewed by the author made this observation:²

Maasai Opinions on Gospel Entry

During an interview with Kutuk Meishoori, a Maasai elder, it became vividly clear that the missionaries expected those who joined Christianity to be completely different from those who were still observing their traditional religion. The new Christians were expected to change from using their staple food, which was normally milk and meat, to using bread and tea instead. They were also expected to change their mode of dress. They were no longer to put on their traditional Maasai red attire, but now to put on shirts and trousers. They were no longer even expected to dance their traditional dances.³

Another Maasai elder, Loshuku Levilal, who is a traditional leader, felt that all aspects of our culture were despised. Our way of dressing was considered to be an uncivilized way of dressing; our way of singing was interpreted as a primitive way of singing. Even though some of our Maasai names carried meanings, missionaries still needed us to change to Western names. I strongly believe that this largely contributed to the rejection of Adventism and Christianity at large by the Maasai people.⁴

Petro Tobikoo, who came from a Maasai background and was converted to Christianity, had this observation: We never expected that after becoming Christians we would be asked to leave behind all our traditions and culture. We knew we would continue keeping our good cultural values. We knew we would continue to enjoy keeping our animals in our difficult environment and dressing in a way that allows us to tend them without any

problems, as we always did. Unfortunately, that was not the case. We were now asked to dress in a “civilized way,” we were encouraged to start wearing pants and shirts. This was almost mandatory, especially when we were attending church services.⁵

When I asked Ngojie Saruni, a Maasai woman of middle age, what she thinks about the missionaries’ position of expecting the Maasai people to change their dress after becoming Christians, she responded by saying: How can someone expect us, the Maasai people, to continue taking care of our animals while wearing western style clothes? How can someone graze cows in thorny bushes while dressed in trousers and shirts? How can you run fast to chase a cow while wearing pants?⁶

Naishiye Napalari, a Maasai young woman, observed: The missionaries ought to know that Maasai people, and especially Maasai warriors, sing even when they are hunting lions. After surrounding a lion in a circle, ready to throw their spears at him, when they discover that the lion is too aggressive, they start entertaining it by singing to it. After noticing that the lion has calmed down, they immediately throw spears at it and eventually kill it.⁷

Analysis

It is observed that the Maasai who became Christians were expected to change their identity completely to a new identity, an identity of the missionary.

The question of identity has indeed emerged as a leading issue in many of the theologies coming out of churches in the Two-Thirds World. Conversion to Christ necessarily involves a measure of discontinuity with the pre-Christian past, and this has been perceived by some as problematic, the more so if it is felt that missionaries involved in the transmission of the gospel also impose their own culture.⁸

On a similar note, one of the most popular African writers, Kwame Bediako, elaborates by saying that

Missionaries did not only challenge African traditional religion, but they disparaged traditional African civilization at every level; conversion, therefore, implied both accepting Christian faith and embracing the culture of the West. To become a Christian was to be in some sense European and, in sharp contrast with the Pauline mission to the Gentiles, there was little or no conception of the validity, or even the possibility, of transposition of the gospel into African categories.⁹

We should not completely condemn or despise all local traditions and beliefs, for it will cause us to miss the truth, to alienate the people, and probably to make significant communication impossible.¹⁰

Adventism’s Unique Approach to Evangelization

The ministry of an Adventist pastor named Mathew Njake to the Maasai people had a unique turn. Pastor Njake was the first Adventist pastor from a Maasai background. When he visited his church members, he never asked

them to gather in a hut for worship. Instead, he conducted worship in the midst of their flock. He also never demanded his Maasai church members to give up their traditional dress.¹¹

Pastor Njake recognized that changing traditional names was a more serious concern for the Maasai people, so he never compelled them to change their names. Pastor Njake still believes that what have been labeled as Christian names are nothing else but European names. Since both native and non-native Adventist pastors have evangelized Maasai communities, it has been evident that the later had cultural confrontation. For example, Thomas Memusi, a Maasai man who was baptized by a non-Maasai Adventist, said:

I did not like the idea of being given a European name. We have our Maasai names with good meanings. Names like: Lesikar (male), meaning someone who celebrates; Nemayani (female), meaning someone full of blessings; Loitopuaki (male), meaning someone who has restored to life; Nemburis (female), meaning someone filled with grace. These make more sense to us! European names, such as, Thomas, Godfrey, Reward, Grace, Rosemary, are hard for us to pronounce, let alone to understand the meaning.¹²

Ela and Donovan seem to agree with Thomas Memusi and suggests that “we should consider the importance of the African symbolism of names. We should use traditional African names and give them a Christian meaning.”¹³ There are plenty of examples from the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, indicating various levels of contextualization which did not affect faith. For example, Jesus becoming the incarnate Son of God (Matt. 1:23), and Paul's assertion that, “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.” (2 Corinthians 9:20)

Way Forward

We conclude by saying that the early missionaries from the western world did a sacrificial work of bringing the good news to Africa and, indeed, to the Maasai people. However, the gospel they brought was not naked, but a gospel covered with their western culture. As a result, African tribes like Maasai, which were strong in preserving their culture, did not easily receive the gospel. They were not willing to receive the gospel at the expense of losing their culture. Therefore, for the gospel to be effectively received by the Maasai people and other African tribes, missionaries from the western world as well as those from the African continent should learn to respect the Maasai cultural values which are not contrary to Bible principles.

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NOTES

1. "The Maasai People," The Maasai Association, accessed April 12, 2020, <http://www.maasai-association.org/maasai.html>.
2. Kutuk Meishoori, interview with the author, February 26, 2020.
3. Loshuku Levilal, interview with the author, February 26, 2020; Petro Tobiko, interview with the author, February 26, 2020; Ngojie Saruni, interview with the author, February 28, 2020; Mepukori Lengiyeu, interview with the author, February 28, 2020; Naishiye Mepalari, interview with the author, February 28, 2020; Lengidong' Melayeki, interview with the author, February 28, 2020; Loosikito Saruni, interview with the author, March 9, 2020; Ngoyeyo Megilienanga, interview with the author, March 9, 2020; Pastor Mbonea Reuben, phone interview with the author, March 11, 2020; Thomas Memusi, interview with the author, March 13, 2020.
3. Kutuk Meishoori, interview with the author, February 26, 2020.
4. Loshuku Levilal, interview with the author, February 26, 2020.
5. Petro Tobiko, interview with the author, February 26, 2020.
6. Ngojie Saruni, interview with the author, February 28, 2020.
7. Naishiye Mepalari, interview with the author, February 28, 2020.
8. Andrew F. Walls, "Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1966).
9. Kwame Bediako, "Gospel and Culture: Some Insights for Our Time from the Experience of the Earliest Church." *Journal of African Christian Thought* 2 (1999): 8-17.
10. Paul G. Herbert and Eloise H. Meneses. *Incarnational Ministry, Planting Churches In Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

11. Loosikito Saruni, interview with the author, March 9, 2020.

12. Thomas Memusi, interview with the author, March 13, 2020.

13. Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Wilbur O. Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa*. (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000).

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