

Muhairwa, Samwiri Muhindo (1927–1986)

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Nathaniel Mumbere Walembe, D.Min. (Andrews University, Berrien Spring, Michigan U.S.A.), retired in 2015 as executive secretary of the East-Central Africa Division (ECD) of Seventh-day Adventists. In retirement, he is assistant editor of this encyclopedia for ECD. A Ugandan by birth, Walembe has served the Seventh-day Adventist Church in many capacities having started as a teacher, a frontline pastor, and principal of Bugema Adventist College in Uganda. He has authored several magazine articles and a chapter, "The Experience of Salvation and Spiritualistic Manifestations," in Kwabena Donkor, ed. *The Church, Culture and Spirits* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2011), pp. 133-143. He is married to Ruth Kugonza and they have six children and fourteen grandchildren.

Samwiri Muhindo Muhairwa was a pioneer pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Rwenzori Mountains of Western Uganda.

Early life

Pastor Muhairwa was born in the Rwenzori Mountains in 1927 to Bikalhwamuhi Owa Kitunzi and Tereza Mbambu in Kitsimba village, Harugali sub-county, Bwamba county (now Bundibugyo district). He was the second child of four children (two boys and two girls). After his father died, his mother married Mr. Kirimenti, a relative of her deceased husband, and moved with her new husband and four children from Kitsimba in Bundibugyo to Kibota, Buhesi Subcounty, Bunyangabu county, Kabarole District. Both Bwamba county and Bunyangabu county were in Toro Kingdom. Muhairwa's mother got another four children (one boy and three girls) with her new husband. Being the first boy, when Samwiri Muhairwa was of age, he became the guardian of his siblings in accordance with the cultural norms.¹

Education, Conversion and Marriage



Samwiri Muhairwa

Photo courtesy of Miriam Biira.

There were no schools in the Rwenzori Mountains where Muhairwa lived. So Muhairwa had no formal education. He learned how to read and write through mature literacy programs which the Adventist church organized.² Kibota village where Muhairwa lived with his mother and siblings is close to Mitandi Mission of the Seventh-day Adventists. The Adventist church held its first evangelistic meeting in 1947. A second evangelistic campaign was held at Mitandi in 1948. The youthful Muhairwa attended the meetings and was among those were baptized after the meetings by Magdalon Lind. Lind had moved to Mitandi around that time and needed house help. Samwiri Muhairwa got the job as a house boy.³

While he was working at the Linds household in Mitandi, Muhairwa married Faisi Musoki, the daughter of Muhindo Omunya Kitonya and Sibithwa Musoki, in 1951. Faisi was about 13 years of age and when Muhairwa introduced her to Pastor Lind, he reprimanded him for marrying an under aged girl.⁴ Muhairwa was about 24 years old when he married. In those times, marriages among the Bakonzo were arranged between the parents of the girl and the boy.⁵

Faisi became an Adventist after she married Muhairwa. Samwiri and Faisi were blessed with six girls and six boys: Ruth Kugonza, Yeremiya Muhindo (deceased), Miriam Biira, Isaya Bwambale, Ellen Mbambu, Naume Ithungu, Enoka Masereka (deceased), Yokobedi Kyakimwa, James Nguru, Isaac Ndobyha and Annet Nziyabake⁶

Ministry

When Samwiri Muhairwa was doing some manual work at the mission, Lind observed his his commitment to duty. As the Adventist church was just developing in the area, there were no Bakonzo workers. Thus, Muhairwa was recruited as an apprentice to evangelist John Mbugosa from Bunyoro. Mbugosa who was the first evangelist at Mitandi.⁷ Many of the workers at Mitandi were from Bunyoro where work started in 1927 and the lower parts of Toro where Adventist work had started in 1945. When Mbugosa was replaced by Bamuturaki, Muhairwa continued to work under him.⁸

When Andereya Bukombi left Bunyangabu church as its evangelist to go to Ncwanga Training College for ministerial training, Samwiri Muhairwa was sent to take charge of the church. Thus, Bunyangabu became the place of his first appointment.⁹ From Bunyangabu he was transferred to Kasisi, Rutete subcounty in Burahya county. After serving there for two years, he was sent to Kikyo in Bundibugyo where he had to climb and descend the mountain on foot to take his monthly report to the mission station office in Fort Portal. It was while serving there that he was ordained to the gospel ministry in 1967.¹⁰ Muhairwa continued to serve in Kikyo and Bum until he was transferred from Bumate to Kazingo in 1975.

Muhairwa was serving at Kazingo when in 1977 Idi Amini Dad, president of Uganda (1971-1979) banned the Adventist church along with 25 other Christian denominations and the Baha'i faith.¹¹ However, during the ban, pastors continued to do evangelism, focusing on home visitations and home churches. As a result, many people joined the church and baptisms were conducted at night. Muhairwa was one of the pastors who continued to

serve the Adventist communities and preach the Adventist message. His wife held the lantern as he baptized new members. Church members continued to give offerings and returned tithes. Every month pastors made reports to the Mission director in Fort Portal.

One day in 1978, Pastor Muhairwa and two other pastors were arrested for disobeying the presidential decree. However, they were released after three days.¹²

Retirement

Years of serving in difficult conditions and his arrest affected his health. His health challenges started with numbness of the legs, feet, arms and fingers during the time of the ban when he used to baptize at night in very cold water of river Mpanga at Kazingo. The situation worsened when he began to have acute back pain that he could no longer work. The church advised him to retire on medical grounds. At the time of his retirement in 1980, no one knew the precise nature of his health problems. Later it was discovered that he had bone cancer. He was committed to the ministry to the end of his life. When he was on his death bed in the hospital, he preached to the patients and prayed with them.¹³ Samwiri Muhairwa died on October 26, 1986. He was buried at Kyamuyinula, Kasanda District, formerly part of Mubende District in Central region of Uganda.¹⁴

Legacy

Pastor Samwiri Muhairwa was committed to the ministry and the work of the church.¹⁵ He was a man of high integrity.¹⁶ He had no formal education, but his contribution as a pioneering pastor to the Adventist work in the Rwenzori Mountains of Western Uganda is great.¹⁷

SOURCES

“Amin Bans All but Three Christian Churches as Risks.” September 21, 1977, *The New York Times* archives. Accessed September 29, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/09/21/archives/amin-bans-all-but-three-christian-churches-as-risks.html#:~:text=The%20vast%20majority%20of%20Christians,apparently%20small%20local%20Christian%20sects>

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NOTES

1. Ebenezer Bageni, telephone interview with the author, Kasese, September 29, 2020.
2. Ibid.
3. Ebenezer Bageni, telephone interview with the author, Kasese, September 29, 2020.
4. Paul Kibwana, interview with the author, Nyakasanga, Kasese, September 25, 2020. Paul Kibwana was a student at Mitandi when Samwiri Muhairwa was working there.
5. Bwambale Deus, "The Bakonzo Tribe," February 15, 2017, *PCJ Students' Life*, accessed September 30, 2020, <http://pcjstudentslife.blogspot.com/2017/02/the-bakonzo-tribe.html#:~:text=All%20marriages%20were%20arranged%20by,to%20choose%20their%20own%20spouses>.
6. Ruth Kugonza, interview with the author, Kyebambe Road, Kasese Municipality, September 28, 2020. Ruth Kugonza is Samwiri Muhairwa's daughter.
7. Yowasi Bukambi, telephone interview with the author, September 28, 2020.
8. Paul Kibwana, interview with the author, Nyakasanga, Kasese, September 25, 2020.
9. Ebenezer Bageni, telephone interview with the author, Kasese, September 29, 2020.
10. Faisi Muhairwa, telephone interview with the author, September 28, 2020. Faisi Muhairwa is the widow of Samwiri Muhairwa.
11. "Amin Bans All but Three Christian Churches as Risks," September 21, 1977, *The New York Times* archives, accessed September 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/09/21/archives/amin-bans-all-but-three-christian-churches-as-risks.html#:~:text=The%20vast%20majority%20of%20Christians,apparently%20small%20local%20Christian%20sects>.
12. Faisi Muhairwa, telephone interview with the author, September 28, 2020. Faisi Muhairwa is the widow of Samwiri Muhairwa.
13. Ebenezer Bageni, telephone interview with the author, Kasese, September 29, 2020.
14. Ibid.
15. Ebenezer Bageni, telephone interview with the author, Kasese, September 29, 2020.
16. Paul Kibwana, interview with the author, Nyakasanga, Kasese, September 25, 2020.
17. Paul Kibwana, interview with the author, Nyakasanga, Kasese, September 25, 2020.

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