

# Onchoke, Abel Nyakundi (1901–1997)

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## NEHEMIAH M. NYAUNDI

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Abel Nyakundi Onchoke was a pastor, educator and administrator from Kenya.

## Early Life and Conversion

Abel Nyakundi Onchoke was born to a polygamous father Onchoke and his mother Moturwa in November 1901 in West Kitutu, Kisii, Kenya. Little is remembered about his childhood, but it is known that his parents moved to Bonyunyu, where he

spent his youthful years herding cattle. During World War I Onchoke died leaving behind Moturwa as a young widow among co-wives. Abel had two siblings Meshack Manono Onchoke and Orosi Onchoke.<sup>1</sup>

In 1919 Nyakundi Onchoke went through the Gusii customary ritual of circumcision which traditionally initiates a young man from childhood into maturity. This happened before he became an Adventist. His contact with the Adventist teaching came around 1921 when he was converted at Bonyunyu Mission School. Bonyunyu was among the earliest out-schools that the Adventist missionaries established. Provision of Western education to young boys was a prominent strategy of evangelization.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, ability to read and write was increasingly becoming fashionable as it made a young man employable by the colonial government. The Adventist mission at Nyanchwa had opened an out-school at Bonyunyu where literacy and Adventist faith were taught. Nyakundi Onchoke was attracted to the novelty of the activities of reading, writing and arithmetic at Bonyunyu which he joined without prompting from his mother. His education therefore was comprised of the knowledge he



Abel Nyakundi Onchoke

Photo courtesy of Nehemiah Nyaundi.

acquired at Bonyunyu Mission School and later at Kamagambo Adventist College.<sup>3</sup>

In 1926 Nyakundi Onchoke was baptized at Nyanchwa Mission Station, then operated by American missionary Eric Beavon, fondly remembered by the locals as *Bwana Bebeni* which was a local pronunciation of "Beavon." The same year Onchoke met Miriam Makoma, then a pupil at Nyanchwa Mission station. Miriam Makoma was born in Nyaribari. The wedding ceremony between the two was officiated by Eric Beavon. Onchoke and his wife Miriam were blessed with seven children born between 1930 and 1951: Naftal Onchoke (1930-2012), Yabes Nyamweya (1933-2002), Aska Kemunto, Naomi Mokeira (1941-1997), Esther Bitutu, Hebron Jimmy Agata, and Hezron Makori (1951-2019).

## Ministry

Soon after his marriage, Nyakundi Onchoke was confirmed as a native missionary, at the time referred to as teacher-evangelist. In 1928 the Seventh-day Adventist mission station at Nyanchwa, then known as South Kenya Field, assigned him the duty of schools inspector in charge of mission schools. In April 1929 he was sent to take the Adventist message to Nchwanga, Uganda in the company of Jeremiah Osoro, Ibrahim Ombega and Petro Risase. In 1930 Onchoke was called back to Kenya and was sent as teacher-evangelist to Nyamagesa in Nyaribari, Kenya.

By 1930, the Adventist Church had been around the Lake Victoria region for nearly 25 years and in Gusii for 18 years. Around this time, the need for trained local ministers started to show. In 1932 Onchoke was among the first teacher-evangelists to complete ministerial training at the Kamagambo Mission Station. Among those who took the training were, Jeremiah Omwenga from Tombe and Zephaniah Machoka from Gesusu.

After the training, Onchoke started full-time pastoral ministry and served in many places, including Nyaribari, Bobasi, Bomajoge and Bogetutu between 1934 and 1938. During that time, Adventist members were few and spread all over the Gusii territory and pastors covered large church districts.

Nyakundi Onchoke was a proficient church-planter. Many church districts credit their beginning to him. Alongside church planting he promoted opening of schools and championed the spread of literacy among converts. During his time, ability to read, write and memorize parts of the Bible was the indicator that a candidate was ready for baptism. Baptismal candidates often took up to two or more years of preparation before being declared suitable for baptism.

In 1939 Nyakundi Onchoke was assigned responsibilities at the South Kenya Field office at Nyanchwa to oversee Youth activities. In 1941-1942 he completed the second part of his ministerial training and obtained a bachelor's diploma. Among those who completed the training with him were Agostino Saisi, Asa Onyiego and Sirwell Moturi. Asa Onyiego later left mission service and went on to become a colonial administrator in Bomajoge. There were many mission-trained people who later left mission service and joined the colonial government

administration. The government paid higher salaries and did not object to polygamous lifestyle. Nyakundi Onchoke remained in pastoral ministry his whole life.

During World War II Onchoke was sent by the Church to serve at Magena, a large church district which at the time included Bomajoge, Bobasi and South Mugirango, a region which shared a border with the Maasai and the Luo people. At the time there were frequent ethnic clashes which required the intervention of the pastor.

After serving at Magena for about three years, Nyakundi was transferred to Kitutu in 1946 where he worked at Nyambaria and Sengera. The year 1948 is memorable because Nyakundi was ordained into ministry and named a mission station director.<sup>4</sup> As a station director, he supervised many pastors in various regions including Bomajoge, Bobasi and South Mugirango during the years 1951-1961.

During his time of service Nyakundi Onchoke did not have a fixed abode. Whenever he moved from one place to another to access his believers, he carried with him luggage which contained personal items, including a blanket, clothes, shoes, toiletries and devotional books. Many times he carried the luggage himself, while at times young men helped him to carry from one church to another. Much of the movement was done on foot. His fellow workers Paul Nyamweya, Elizaphan Oendo, Nathaniel Nyanusi, Jonathan Auma, Johnson Agoki, Stephenson Maturi, and Isaiah Omwega often moved and traveled like Onchoke.

Nyakundi Onchoke served at a time when the Abagusii<sup>5</sup> people of Kenya were deeply traditional and indigenous beliefs and practices dominated the community. He was the first to confront cultural beliefs and customs which burdened new Adventist converts such as a father not being allowed to enter his son's house and a son-in-law not being allowed to enter his mother-in-law's house.

Nyakundi Onchoke is remembered for his unequivocal stand against polygamy which was widespread then. Many converts were polygamous because the practice was customary and encouraged. The missionaries asked a polygamous convert to take one of his wives and abandon the rest in order to be baptized. Some of the men conceded to that prescription but would fall back because they returned to the wives they had put aside.

Onchoke served at a time when the South Kenya Field asked newly recruited converts to settle in exclusive settlements known as mission villages.<sup>6</sup> Mission villages were restricted communities where only converts were admitted into. These settlements became necessary because missionaries realized that converts were often attracted back into traditional lifestyle until they learned the new Christian way of life. The missionaries realized that when converts settled in mission villages and taught properly, the temptation to revert back to old practices was minimized. These settlements existed approximately between 1915-1958.

During 1954-1955, there was a crisis involving mission schools. Wanting to improve the quality of education, the colonial government introduced a program of 'grants-in Aid' to mission schools and raised salaries to teachers in public schools. The Adventist mission refused to accept the government subsidy because accepting the subsidy meant that the mission gave allegiance to the government which could then take over the mission schools.

Some teacher-evangelists left Mission service and moved to teach in public schools because the salary was higher. Nyakundi Onchoke did not fall to the attraction to high salary.

## Member of Gusii Community

Pastor Nyakundi Onchoke had a remarkable working personality. He was among the first people who knew how to read and write in his community. He always carried a Bible with him which he put to good use. Nyakundi knew Gusii culture, customs and history. He knew much about indigenous medicine and healing using herbs. Many Adventists came to him in search of herbal medicine to treat various ailments. Women who had difficulty to conceive benefited from the herbs he dispensed. All over Gusii there are men named Abel Nyakundi because their mothers were able to conceive after using herbal mixtures given to them by Nyakundi Onchoke.

## Later Years and Demise

Abel Nyakundi Onchoke was a proficient preacher and Bible interpreter. He lived almost twenty years after retirement all this time preaching his favorite messages from the books of Daniel and Revelation. He died on March 10, 1997 at Kisii town and was buried at his village located at Nyamisieka near Kiogoro township in Kisii County, Kenya.

Source

Nyaundi, Nehemiah M. *Seventh-day Adventism in Gusii, Kenya*. Kendu Bay: Africa Herald Publishing House, 1997.

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### NOTES

1. Harrison Moronya (son in-law to Pastor Abel Nyakundi Onchoke), interview by the author, Nyanchwa Mission office, Kisii Town, July 12, 2020.
2. Nehemiah M. Nyaundi, *Seventh-day Adventism in Gusii, Kenya* (Kendu Bay: Africa Herald Publishing House, 1997), 49-84.
3. Hebron Agata Nyakundi (son of Pastor Abel Nyakundi Onchoke), interview by the author, Kisii Town, July 17, 2020.
4. Station director is a designation of ministerial leadership overseeing a large territory with several district pastors who report to a station director.
5. The Abagusii are a Bantu ethnic group of people who live in the South Western region of Kenya, predominantly in the Gusii region. In 2019 there were over one million Abagusii.
6. Mission villages were "converts only" settlements which Christian Missions across Kenya used to settle converts to protect them from traditional religious customs and practices and teach them Christian lifestyle. The practice was abandoned at the close of the 1950s towards

Kenya's political independence (Nyaundi, 95-127).

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