

# Adventists and Kuria Culture, Tanzania

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## Origin of the Kuria Tribe

The Kuria Tribe is among the Bantu ethnic groups. It is believed that they originated in the Middle East, Specifically in Mesopotamia in present day Iraq. Pastoralist, they migrated down through Ethiopia, Sudan, and Uganda along the Nile River Valley, looking for pasture for their livestock. They settled in Uganda for some years, then moved towards the southwest coast of Lake Victoria, through Kigoma and Kagera (West Lake Region), and when they arrived in the Mara Region, they settled there permanently. It is assumed that they started to spread throughout the Mara Region in Tanzania, before moving into the Kuria districts of Kenya.<sup>1</sup>

## The Clans of the Kuria

The Kuria are made of twenty-five clans: Abhairege, Abhagumbe, Abhanyabasi, Abhakira, Abhatimbaru, Abhasweta, Abhakenye, Abhamera, Abhasembete, Abhatobhoori, Abhakerobha, Abhahunyaga, Abhakabwa, Abhakine, Abhakiseru, Abharieri, Abhategi, Abhagirango, Abhagire, and Abhakeroni, Abhangurweme, Abhachanake (Abhazanaki), Abhaikizu, Abhaisenye, and Abhanata. Though they are many, they have one culture and practice the same rituals.<sup>2</sup>

## The Economy of the Kuria

As earlier indicated, the Kuria keep animals such as cattle, goats, sheep, and fowl. They also farm. For security purposes, they keep dogs and cats. Historically, their food consisted mainly of meat, blood, and milk. They paid for their wives using livestock. Livestock were also exchanged for food. They used animal skins for clothing and bedding. Since the Kuria became farmers in the modern era, oxen are used for ploughing.<sup>3</sup>

## Kuria Culture

*Food:* Together with grain, Kurians eat meat, blood, and drink milk. They ate meat from cattle, sheep, goats, and wild animals such as buffalo, zebra, water hog, giraffe, and pigs or swine.

*Dress:* Before modern clothes, Kurians made their clothes from animals' skins. They knew how to decorate their clothes and make them beautiful.

*Leisure:* Kurians have activities that could stimulate their joy, or encourage them to go to war. They used songs, trumpets, several kinds of dances, and sayings.<sup>4</sup>

*Rites of Passage:* In preparing for marriage, age is not a consideration, but whether the person was circumcised. This applied to both male and female. If a person was circumcised, even if he/she was ten years old, he/she was considered to be grown up enough to get married and start a new family. The rite of circumcision was performed after the approval of landmen (traditional priests who take care of the affairs of a particular community). For them to approve circumcision to take place, they asked for an assurance from the spirits, which they met in the mountains or at the banks of rivers at the places where they worshiped them. They observed the flowers in the mountains or forests and watched the flow of the water in the river to determine the approval or disapproval of the gods. If they noted something wrong, they performed a propitiation by either killing a chosen animal, or a human male or female, in order to clear the way for the rite. They also made sure that circumcision would never take place in the year that ends with the number seven because it is believed to be cursed, and circumcision done in such a year would cause death of the candidates.<sup>5</sup>

*Marriage:* Kurians do not believe in celibacy or single parenting. Every Kuria man and woman must be married to someone who is circumcised. Polygamy is prevalent in Kuria and deeply ingrained in the society. Kuria society has many taboos that are anti-Christian; however, those who join the Christian church become genuine believers.<sup>6</sup>

## Introduction of Adventist Faith into Kuria Society

Kuria land was attractive to European settlers, who were soon followed by missionaries. F. Bornath of Germany arrived on June 28, 1912, followed by V. E. Toppenberg, who settled at Kibumaye (Utimbaru)<sup>7</sup> Chief Werema Surati gave remarkable support to the missionaries by providing them with manpower as they built their residences and a school.<sup>8</sup>

The missionaries soon discovered that the best way to introduce the gospel was, initially, to establish schools and, later, health services. This method so impressed Chief Werema Surati that he supported the projects of erecting Kibumaye Primary School and Kibumaye Seventh-day Adventist church. The chief provided laborers who were paid monthly. They worked from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day and earned three rupees a month.<sup>9</sup>

For missionaries to communicate with Kurians, they needed a translator fluent in both the Kiswahili and KiKuria languages. Mwitā Mukira, a Kurian who was educated, served that purpose. Once they finished building the school, church, and residence, Chief Werema helped recruit students for the school. He assigned sub-chiefs to ensure students enrolled at the school. Chief Werema asked his sub-chiefs to each bring at least five students.

The sub-chiefs commanded their soldiers to collect students even if the task was not easy. However, they managed to bring students to school.<sup>10</sup>

Although the missionaries were teaching secular academic subjects, they found ways to introduce the word of God, which penetrated the minds of the students. Missionaries used their school students' to invite people to attend Bible study sessions. This method became effective in preaching the gospel in Kuria society!<sup>11</sup>

## First Baptism in Kuria Land (1914)

Despite the cultural challenges they encountered, missionaries witnessed the first fruits of their struggle as the first ten converts were baptized on April 23, 1914. The first converts baptized on that day were Yohana Gati, Daudi Chacha, Paulo Mwita, Andrea Guragura, Yakobo Guragura, Yusufu Makuri, Isaka Ngomahi, Petro Tisoro, Nyamugire Chagucho, and Filipino Okech. The pastor who officiated at the baptism was Ernest Person.<sup>12</sup>

## The Growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kuria

Despite ups and downs, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Kuria experienced tremendous growth from 1912 to 2021. It is assumed that Kurians demographically number more than two million, if those who live in Kenya are included. The number of Kurians who live in Tanzania is assumed to be more than 1,600,000, and those who live in Kenya are more than 400,000. Within this number, Seventh-day Adventists account for 77,460 in Tanzania, worshipping in 214 churches and 125 companies on the Kuria land.<sup>13</sup>

Soon after the first Kurians were converted on the Tanganyikan side of the border, they joined the work of spreading the gospel wherever they were sent. Some were sent to preach to their fellow Kurians on the Kenyan side of the border. Among those who were sent to Kenya were Mishael Nyahonyo, Samuel Marwa Mang'era, Cornelius Machage, and Gabriel Nyagesagane. Through the work of Kuria missionaries from Tanganyika to Kuria communities in Kenya, the Seventh-day Adventist Church matured, and several churches, districts, and mission stations were established among the Kenyan Kuria .<sup>14</sup>

## The Impact of Seventh-day Adventist Church on Kuria Culture

Since 1912, when the Seventh-day Adventist Church was introduced to Kuria society, there has been positive spiritual, academical, social, health, and church development.

Missionaries introduced the word of God to the heathen community, and after two years they managed to baptize ten converts in 1914. By March 2021, there were more than 77,460 church members—not counting children or baptismal candidates— in the Kuria area. If one attends an Adventist church in Tanzania, in Kenya, or elsewhere in eastern Africa, one will find a connection to the Kuria. They were worshipping evil spirits, but now most of them insist on worshipping God the Creator of the Universe and believe that salvation is in Jesus Christ

who died on the Cross.

Before 1912, Kurians were not interested in education, unless they were forced by the government, but once the Adventist Church clarified the meaning of education and the importance of it, they accepted it and schools were built. In addition to Kibumaye Primary School, the following primary schools were built in Kuria territory: Nyansincha, Nyangoto, Magoto, Nyabitocho, Nyabihore, and Nkende. Two of these schools are now secondary schools: Nyansincha and Nyabihore. These schools have produced very important figures such as Zephaniah Bina, who became the president of the East Nyanza, Central Nyanza, and East Tanzania Fields; Thadeus Chacha, who became president of the Mara Kagera Field; and many more pastors. There are also many figures who were educated in these schools and served in the government, including Philemon Sarungi, who was a minister in the Tanzanian government; Samuel Wangwe, who was a senior lecturer at the university; and many more. Many people in the Kuria community understand that many excellent scholars come from Adventist families.<sup>15</sup>

Kurians have made effort to improve their social condition. They were polygamous before they encountered the Adventist message, but now many of them are against this system of life. They were rough and warsome before the Adventist message, but now most of them are humble and gentle. Previously, stealing was an acceptable practice, but now they regard it as deviant behavior. Kurians have also become friendly to other tribes and mingle with them freely.

Before the introduction of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to the Kuria, they did not see the importance of medical dispensaries and hospitals, but now there are many dispensaries, health centers, and hospitals in the area frequently patronized by Kurians. The Seventh-day Adventist Church established Kibumaye Seventh-day Adventist Dispensary and Tarime Seventh-day Adventist Dispensary, both trusted by their communities. Kurian's health has been improved by Adventist health educators who taught people about the dangers of drinking contaminated water and eating uncooked meat.<sup>16</sup>

Since the arrival of Seventh-day Adventist missionaries in Kuria land in 1912, evangelism has been continuous. Many people have accepted the gospel and joined the ministry in different fields. Their professions include teachers, doctors, nurses, accountants in addition to pastors and evangelists. Notable Adventist Kurians include Chacha Megera, a treasurer for the Tanzania Union Mission; Joakim Chacha Sando, auditor for the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church; Stephen Magesa Bina, conference executive secretary, field president, union executive secretary, union president, and division communication director; Denis Wairaha, auditor for the General Conference; Dickson Matiko, treasurer of the union conference; Zephaniah Bina, president of the field; Thadeus Chacha Matinyi, president of the field; James Chacha Machage, president of the conference; Enoch Marwa Sando, executive secretary of the conference and field president; Girimbe Samuel Chacha, executive secretary of the conference and the union; Samson Keraka, the conference. In addition to these officers, there are more than eighteen departmental directors of conferences and unions, and more than fifty-five pastors who have come from the Kuria society. There is also a large number of lay people from Kuria

society who are preaching vigorously.<sup>17</sup>

From the evidence above, there is no doubt that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has made a significant impact on Kurian culture and created a notable spiritual, academic, and social legacy.

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## NOTES

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