

Otieno, Simeon Dea (1915–2013)

GEORGE EZEKIEL OJWANGA

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Simeon Dea Otieno, a native of Utegi, Tarime, Mara Region, Tanzania, was an Adventist pastor, teacher, and evangelist, and the first African pastor to hold the position of executive secretary of the Tanzania Union Mission.

Early Life

Otieno was born in 1915 to Dea Otieno,¹ who was among the young Luo migrants from Kenya who crossed the River Mori at Bugajo, Kiterere, in search of new life. He married a young Luo girl to whom Simeon and several other children were born. Simeon Dea Otieno grew and was married to Ester Oranga who gave birth to seven children: Daudi, George, Rhesa, Jalayo, Asubuhi, Evangel, and Joyce.

Simeon Dea Otieno was raised in a non-Adventist environment, but joined the Church when he enrolled at Buganjo, an Adventist school, where he was baptized on January 1, 1932. It was the Adventist school environment that shaped his faith.²

Education

Simeon Dea Otieno attended Buganjo, Kibumaye, and Ikizu schools respectively. From 1928 to 1931, he completed classes I to III at Buganjo Primary School. In 1932, he studied class IV at Kibumaye Central School in Tarime. He finished classes V to IX between 1932 to 1936 at Ikizu Middle School then in the Musoma District (now the Bunda District). In 1948-1949, he studied for a diploma in ministry at Bugema Missionary College in Uganda. At that time, the church's focus was on how to increase church membership. When the church saw a need to incorporate Africans in leadership, Simeon Dea Otieno was sent to Solusi College, Zimbabwe, in 1963 for a leadership course.³ Upon completion, he returned well-equipped for leadership.

Denominational Employment

Otieno began his carrier as a teacher-evangelist at Ikizu Central School from 1950 to 1951. He then became a front-line pastor in several districts: Utegi-Luo, Mwanza-Sukuma, Pare- Kilimanjaro, Magomeni-Dar-es Salaam, and Zanzibar Island (1952-1955) respectively. He was elected president of the Majita Mission and Ukerewe Field based at Bwasi from 1957 to 1962. From 1964 to 1968, he was president of the East Nyanza Field based at

Kibumaye Mission Station, which was comprised of North Mara and other areas of Rorya. Otieno served the Tanzania Union Mission as executive secretary from 1969 to 1975.⁴

Contribution to the Development of the Adventist Faith in Tanzania

Simeon Dea Otieno was the first African executive secretary of Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Tanzania Union Mission. He was a resourceful bridge-builder between church and the government. He maintained a good relationship with the government at a time when Whites were still denominational leaders in Tanzania. At that time, Tanzania had attained independence and it was pursuing the path of African socialism, termed *Ujamaa na Kujitegemea*. Otieno's role became key after the government passed the Arusha Declaration on January 26, 1967, which nationalized private schools including Adventist schools.⁵ Nationalization is the transfer of a major branch of industry or commerce from private to state ownership or control. The few that remained private were under threat of nationalization. Otieno provided a buffer between the government and the church.

Otieno was well-known as a pastor, teacher, evangelist, enthusiastic leader.⁶ He was also a good youth trainer. Often invited to conduct seminars in and outside the country,⁷ Otieno was a distinctive figure in Tanzania, representing the Christianity brought by Adventist missionaries from Europe. He was known as a pastor who held peculiar Adventist standards among his erring natives. He was one of the foremost proponents of complete abstinence from political matters for members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church even before independence.

In spite of being threatened by *Uhuru-freedom* enthusiasts, he took a firm stand, especially against participation in political rallies, on violating the seventh-day Sabbath. Simeon Dea Otieno represents loyal Tanzania church employees who insisted on unity, love, and equality between African and European workers.

As the first African in a union office, Otieno championed the change in the recruitment of workers, which started in schools and community health facilities. He belongs to the first generation of Tanzanian Adventist leaders who served on a regional and national level at the same time. He never lost contact with lay church members. He was a champion of church policy.⁸

Simeon Dea Otieno retired in 1975 and died on March 2, 2013, on a Sabbath day.⁹ He was buried in his home town of Buganjo, Rorya, Mara, Tanzania.

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NOTES

1. "Otieno, Simion Dea," A Dictionary of African Christian Biography, 2021, accessed July 8, 2021, <https://dacb.org/stories/tanzania/otieno-simeon/>.
2. Asubuhi Simeon Dea Otieno, son of Simeon Dea Otieno, interview by author, Mara, Tanzania, October 3, 2020.
3. Life sketch of Simeon Dea Otieno, Funeral, March 2, 2013, Buganjo, Rorya, Mara, Tanzania.
4. Simeon Dea Otieno Diary. See also Life Sketch of Simeon Dea Otieno.
5. Chuo Kikuu cha Dar es Salaam, Dept. of Political Science, *Taamuli*, Volume 6, Issue 2 and Volume 11, Issue 2 (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: East Africa Bureau, 1976), 78.
6. Cleveland Rhesa Simeon Dea Otieno, grandson of Simeon Dea Otieno, interview by author, Mara, Tanzania, September 7, 2020.
7. Nehemiah M. Nyaundi, *Seventh-day Adventism in Gusii, Kenya* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Africa Herald Publishing House, 1997), 195.
8. Höschele, Stefan. *Centennial Album of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Tanzania: Pictures from Our History, 1903-2003*. Arusha: Tanzania Union of Seventh-day Adventists, 2003.
9. Life sketch of Simeon Dea Otieno, Funeral, March 2, 2013, Buganjo, Rorya, Mara, Tanzania.

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