

# Sabbath-keeping Challenges in West-Central Africa Division

---

EFE M. EHIOGHAE

Efe M. Ehioghae is a professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at Babcock University, Ilshin Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria.

---

One of the challenges facing members in the West-Central Africa Division (WAD) of Seventh-day Adventists is associated with Sabbathkeeping. This is particularly the case for impoverished members in poor or developing economies where many people find it difficult to eke out a living. The challenges to Sabbath-keeping facing Adventists in WAD may be classified under three major subheadings: culture, the influence of technology, and poverty.

## Culture

*Culture* has been defined as the beliefs, values and priorities of a community expressed through its practices.<sup>1</sup> The tension between Christianity and culture is perennial. Jesus anticipated the dilemma when He petitioned His Father in a high priestly prayer that His disciples be protected from the corruption in the world (John 17:15-18). The question is: How do believers relate to culture? This question is germane in the context of Sabbath-keeping as it relates to weddings and funerals.

*Marriage*: In the African setting, marriage is very important; getting and being married is considered to be a duty that every normal person should perform. According to John S. Mbiti, a foremost African scholar, marriage is not only a “rhythm of life in which everyone must participate,” it is so important that failure to get married under normal circumstances is tantamount to a rejection of society and society’s rejection in return.<sup>2</sup> Marriages, whether traditional or church weddings, as they relate to Sabbath observance are contentious issues in WAD. The appropriateness of conducting such rites on the Sabbath day has frequently generated controversies. Many of the churches in the Division have policy guidelines on when and how such ordinances should be conducted. Marriage itself may not be out of tune with the spirit of proper Sabbath observance. But there are cultural dimensions that are problematic: The elaborate preparations required and the convivial, secular atmosphere that accompany most traditional marriage ceremonies. The same may be seen in church wedding receptions. Sometimes, regardless of how the intending couples try to navigate these challenges, there are still infractions on the solemnity of the Sabbath even when such marriages take place on the first day of the week.

*Funerals:* Generally, Africans are careful to dispose of the dead in a culturally acceptable way.<sup>3</sup> Such cultural beliefs and practices can exact much influence on members who struggle not to violate family traditions and at the same time be loyal to biblical strictures. These traditions may require that funerals be conducted on certain days of the week. Some days of the week are considered inappropriate because of cultural taboos. It becomes a big challenge when one loses a father or mother in a non-Adventist family and one has little or no say about decisions on the funeral rites. Would an Adventist feel culturally bound to attend such funerals, if it is on a Sabbath day? Funerals in the traditional African settings usually involve more than the nuclear family. Commitments then could easily be sacrificed on the altar of expediency when a funeral is conducted on the Sabbath day. This challenge is not easy to wish away because children play important roles in the funeral of their parents.

## Influence of Technology

Technology impacts the way worship on Sabbath. Cell phones, tablets, and other technological contrivances can be useful for both preparing sermons and delivery. However, there is the downside of technology as it relates to Sabbath observance. Church members can be physically present in the church while they are virtually watching other content. The invasion of technology into people's "private spaces" and even into "sacred time" which Joshua Heschel, a Jewish scholar, referred to as a "Palace in Time,"<sup>4</sup> has secularized the Sabbath. The secularization (or desecration) of the Sabbath, through exposures to the web, does not end with worship sessions. Unsolicited calls and texting from multiple interactive platforms make Sabbath rest almost impossible. When "the Sabbath has had no rest,"<sup>5</sup> worshippers are deprived of the privilege of having "vacation with God."<sup>6</sup> Technology can simplify people's challenges, but, when abused, it contributes to people becoming more restless every day, not sparing the Sabbath. Not only physical rest is disrupted, as both psychological and spiritual rest are also negatively impacted.

## Poverty

Poverty is endemic in some parts of Africa, including WAD.<sup>7</sup> It is not only a socio-economic challenge governments grapple with. It affects commitments to God and how we relate to the sacredness of the Sabbath. Poverty has a way of making members rationalize a clear violation of the Sabbath. Especially in rural settings, some members attend village markets, which usually hold four or five days at intervals, on a Sabbath day. It is not uncommon for members struggling to make ends meet to reason that survival is more important than strict adherence to a command.

While not an excuse for Sabbath-keeping violation, poverty can make those who are weak in faith rationalize their conduct. This is a challenge the wisdom book of Proverbs may have envisaged when it said poverty can lead people to behave in an unethical manner (Prov. 30: 9). Alleviating poverty is not only a vital aspect of church

ministry,--it can also help commitments to Sabbath observance.

## Miscellaneous Challenges

Other challenges impinge on Sabbath observance in WAD. They include examinations scheduled by the government's regulating bodies, the election of public officers or government functionaries, and sanitation exercises on Sabbath days. Sometimes members have to choose between violating a Sabbath precept or losing a significant job offer. For so many years, some of the examinations conducted by the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC), a regional examination body, have been held on Saturday without regard to Sabbath-keepers. Even Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), a body responsible for entrance examinations into Nigerian universities, has not always provided a level playing ground for all candidates. Some Sabbath-keeping members have had to forfeit their admissions because they would not write examinations on Sabbath. This often poses a huge challenge to conscientious worshippers who want to be faithful to their commitments. The door of upward mobility in a career that educational advancement opens is often jeopardized when citizens are denied their constitutional rights to access education. Members are also disenfranchised from exercising their civic rights when elections are conducted on Sabbath.

## Conclusion

These challenges call for concerted efforts on the part of the Church to ameliorate their impacts on members where possible. But it must be pointed out that members will have to grapple with the Sabbath observance challenges until the end of time. A legalistic approach to Sabbath observance is to be avoided. Here, like every other moral precept, individual commitment matters. While it may not be advisable to spell out every minutiae rule for Sabbath-keeping, the principles undergirding the command remain. Ultimately, whether or not we observe the Sabbath would be a reflection of our loyalty to God and our commitment to His revealed will.

---

### SOURCES

Bacchiocchi, Samuelle. *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: A Theological Study of the Good News of the Sabbath for Today*. Berrien Springs, Michigan: Biblical Perspectives, 1988.

Emife, S. Nwani, and Emeka Osuji. "Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa: The dynamics of population, energy consumption and misery index." *International Journal of Management, Economics and Social Sciences* 9, No. 4 (2020): 247-270.

Heschel, Joshua J. *The Sabbath: Its meaning for modern man*. Boston: Shambhala Publishers, 2003.

Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1985.

Ndemanu, Michael T. "Traditional African religions and their influences on the worldviews of Bangwa people of Cameroon: Expanding the cultural horizons of study abroad students and professionals." *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, XXX, No. 1 (January 2018): 70-84.

Niebuhr, Richard. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper and Row, 1951.

Rasi, Humberto M. "Christians Versus Culture: Should We Love or Hate the World?" *Dialogue* 7, No. 2 (1995).

White, Ellen G. *Desire of Ages*. Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898.

---

## NOTES

1. Humberto M. Rasi, "Christians Versus Culture: Should We Love or Hate the World?" *Dialogue* 7, No. 2 (1995), 377. See also Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).
2. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1985), 133.
3. Michael T. Ndemanu, Traditional African religions and their influences on the worldviews of Bangwa people of Cameroon: Expanding the cultural horizons of study abroad students and professionals, *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, XXX, No. 1 (January 2018), 70-84. In Bangwa culture, Cameroon, people would, upon dying, state categorically how they would like be buried. Such wills are usually respected.
4. Joshua J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its meaning for modern man* (Boston: Shambhala Publishers, 2003): 1. Heschel's reference to the Sabbath as 'Temple of Time' captures the magnificence of the Sabbath.
5. Samuelle Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: A Theological Study of the Good News of the Sabbath for Today* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Biblical Perspectives, 1988): 55.
6. *Ibid.*, 94. See also Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898): 282.
7. Nwani S. Emife and Emeka Osuji, "Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa: The dynamics of population, energy consumption and misery index," *International Journal of Management, Economics and Social Sciences* 9, No. 4 (2020): 247-270.

---

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000