

Gumbo, Baleni (c.1855–1931)

GODFREY K. SANG

Godfrey K. Sang is a historical researcher and writer with an interest in Adventist history. He holds a B.A. in History from the University of Eastern Africa Baraton and a number of qualifications from other universities. He is a published author. He is the co-author of the book *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*

Before he became a Seventh-day Adventist, Baleni Gumbo was recognized as the first African to embrace the Christian faith in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).¹ He became a Christian through the work of Rev. Thomas Morgan Thomas² of the London Missionary Society, who had established a mission at Shiloh in Matabeleland North. Gumbo was baptized in 1881 and on April 24, 1882, he married Lomaqele, who had been a servant at the Thomas home for 12 years.³

During the First Matabele Uprising (1893-1894), Baleni supplied vegetables to the British troops and a grateful Cecil Rhodes rewarded him with 200 acres of land at Mzingwane. Rhodes also had a permanent home built for him.⁴

Becoming an Adventist

Gumbo was brought to the faith at a chance encounter in 1916 with the Adventist evangelist Jim Mayinza. A storm overtook Mayinza on his way to school, forcing him to seek shelter at the Gumbo home. Mayinza, at that time a student at Solusi, entered the house and sat quietly by the fireplace. And as was the custom of the Ndebele, he did not introduce himself until spoken to first by his host.⁵ Gumbo greeted the young man and, when he said he was from Solusi, a conversation ensued and Mayinza ably took him through a Bible study as they waited for the rain to subside. At first, Gumbo did not think he had much to learn from the young man and he told him as much. But as things progressed, he was so surprised to learn that what he had based his faith on did not quite add up. At some point he thought that he was hearing this from a different Bible; but when he



Baleni Gumbo and his wife, Lomaqele.

From Michael M. Sparrow collection.

brought out his own Bible, it was just the same. He accepted the Adventist faith.

In 1918 Gumbo and his wife, together with their sons and their families, 11 in all, were baptized by Pastor Hubert M. Sparrow, who was then attached to the Solusi Mission.⁶

Life as an Adventist

Baleni became a Seventh-day Adventist, much to the disappointment of the leaders of the London Missionary Society. After his conversion, many members of his former mission also became Adventists, which precipitated a major crisis.⁷ The mission immediately disfellowshipped him, together with those who followed him into the Adventist Church. The church and school he had founded on his property were also disowned and closed down. Efforts to revive them were greatly frustrated. Government authorities summoned the missionary in charge of Solusi Mission, F. R. Stockil, to explain the state of affairs. He gave them a satisfactory answer, whereupon the Adventists were allowed to take over the school and also establish a church on Baleni's property. Baleni became a powerful evangelist, bringing to the faith many people and establishing numerous companies which later became full churches.

Towards the end of March 1931, he became ill and passed away on April 4, 1931.⁸ Several days before he died, he constantly asked when it would be Sabbath. When the day finally came, he said, "Now I can truly rest in the hope of seeing my Saviour."⁹ And with that, he died.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. F. R. Stockil, "The First Convert in Rhodesia," *African Division Outlook*, February 15, 1922, 5-6.

2. Nansi Ceridwen Jones, "Thomas, Thomas Morgan (1828-1884), missionary," *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://biography.wales/article/s-THOM-MOR-1828>.
3. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Rethinking religious encounters in Matabeleland region of Zimbabwe, 1860-1893," *African Journal of History and Culture* (AJHC) Vol. 1 (2), June 2009, 16-23.
4. Ibid.
5. H. M. Sparrow, "Walk Thou Before Me," *Youth's Instructor*, November 8, 1927, 3.
6. H. M. Sparrow, "Gumbo, Baleni," obituary, *African Division Outlook*, June 1, 1931, 16.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

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