

Ruto, Silvano Chepsiror (1909–1919)

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Silvano Chepsiror araap Ruto was a pioneer Adventist evangelist, lay leader, and administrator in northern Nandi in western Kenya.

Early Life

Silvano Chepsiror araap Ruto was born in 1909 in Sigot village in northern Nandi. He was the son of a Kwavi Maasai man named Lesandich and a Nandi woman, Tapkurgoi CheboKapsonet. His father was from the Kimnyigei age group of the Kibongoi clan whose animal totem is Quail or *Taiywet*. He grew up as a Nandi boy taking care of the family animals.

Becoming an Adventist

Silvano first met Ezekiel Kimenjo araap Maswai who was preaching at Kabiemit in 1936 along with Caleb Kipkessio araap Busienei. Silvano was weeding his farm when Ezekiel approached him with his own hoe and joined him in the weeding without saying a word. After a while he introduced himself and informed him that he was conducting a meeting that evening and would love it if he were to join him. Silvano agreed. That would mark the start of his Adventist journey of faith. Kimenjo preached and he was touched and decided that he would join the faith. An avid reader, he consumed Adventist literature and soon was speaking to his neighbors about his newfound faith. In no time there was a congregation at Kabiemit after the evangelistic campaign by Maswai. In 1939 he married Sarah, the sister of Aaron Moiben araap Too, one of the early Adventist evangelists and pastors.

After attending baptismal classes beginning in 1939, he was baptized by Peter Chetambe in 1941, on the same day as Enoch araap Keino who later became a pastor. Silvano now was a part of the original elders who were taught by D. M. Swaine, the missionary in charge of Chebwai, to become fulltime missionaries and gospel workers among the Nandi. The others already in the service of the church included Aaron Moiben araap Too, Enoch araap Keino, Ezekiel Kimenjo araap Maswai, and Caleb Kipkessio araap Busienei. Shortly afterwards, Swaine left, and in his place came Pastor K. J. Berry. Berry encouraged Silvano to start a church at Kabiemit,

which he did, and he went on to organize a church at Kaplemur where a large school stands today.

Evangelistic Work

Soon after he was baptized, Ruto became a fiery preacher of the gospel moving from place to place conducting evangelistic campaigns. He brought many people to Christ through patiently teaching them from the Bible. He also gained a mastery of Bible prophesy and was an expert in Daniel and Revelation. He had a very powerful voice and did not mince his words on Bible truths. Some of his early converts included Abraham araap Rugut, Marko araap Misoi and his wife Jane, Clarah wife of Abraham, and James Kurgat among others. They would be pioneers in various other places in Nandi. Silvano carried out evangelistic campaigns at Emdin, Tendwo, Samitui, Chesumei, and Tuloi, and he even went beyond Nandi to Kapsokwony in the Mt. Elgon area where he preached at Chemoge where a church stands today.

On account of his leadership qualities, the Nandi district commissioner appointed him a member of the provincial administration to work as a sub-chief under Chief Katonon of Kabiyet. He told the district commissioner that he would accept the work only on condition that he would not be required to work on Sabbath.¹ The district commissioner was agreeable and granted his request. He did this work for a while, but left to concentrate on the work of the church. He was appointed as a missionary for the church in 1955. He was in the pioneer team that translated the lesson quarterly into the Nandi language and was instrumental in its distribution in the northern Nandi region.²

The Struggle for the Church

In 1953 Ruto decided to apply for a church-sponsored school at Kaplemur. As soon as his application was received, a rival denomination also decided to apply for a school at the same spot. Ruto traveled to Kapsabet and objected to the move, stating that the Adventist application came first and should be considered first. Nobody would listen. When it became apparent that the other denomination would get the school, Ruto petitioned the District Education Board and the district commissioner asking them to reconsider, but he did not get anywhere.

Back in 1950, the then Rift Valley provincial commissioner expressed his satisfaction at the expulsion of Maswai and noted that the Local Native Council (forerunner of the African District Council), had denied the Adventists' applications to open two schools.³ One of the schools that had been rejected was that of Silvano araap Ruto at Kabiemit. The unrelenting Ruto constantly petitioned the district commissioner in Nandi to approve his school and church.

On March 8, 1954, he decided to write to the Rift Valley provincial commissioner R. E. Wainwright in Nakuru, the highest authority of the colonial administration in the region, protesting the frustration he had encountered

with the Nandi district commissioner over the school at Kabiemit. It must be noted that there was not a single Adventist school in the whole of Nandi at this time. Several which had started had been forcefully closed down in a classic case of official resistance to Adventism in the region. The eviction of evangelist Ezekiel Kimenjo Maswai from Samitui and numerous frustrating attempts at registering Adventist schools did not deter Ruto from trying again.

The next four years sped by with little or no progress with regard to the authorities. Silvano continued to lead his Sabbath School quietly so as not to arouse the suspicion of the authorities. In February 1954 he took his petition papers to the district commissioner who flatly refused to accept the papers. This is when he wrote the appeal to the provincial commissioner.⁴ The letter was written in Kiswahili, barely legible and almost incongruous, but you could not miss the depth of Silvano's conviction on what he believed was rightfully his. He sent the letter the same day he wrote it and it was received by the provincial commissioner of the vast Rift Valley province at Nakuru. The letter roused immediate reaction from the acting provincial commissioner S. O. V. Hodge who wrote to the Nandi district commissioner Tom Thrupp asking for a report on the matter. The district commissioner, who understood the local rivalries, then wrote back to him saying that he had held a council meeting in Kaplemur and stated that the general policy of the administration was to oppose any attempts by the Adventists to establish in Nandi. He said in closing: "I admit I am trying to keep the S.D.A. out, so far with the firm backing of the A.D.C., but I have been able to do this on entirely legal grounds, and without any ill feeling being roused. However, to put the matter on an even surer footing, I will refer it to the forthcoming A.D.C. meeting."⁵

The statement is quite telling of the general attitude towards the Adventists in Nandi and this is really where the problem lay. The provincial administration was unwittingly taking sides in religious matters, preferring to advance the denominational interests of its members.

Clearly the Adventists were not fighting individuals, but a whole system and the officialdom were determined to keep them out of Nandi. The provincial commissioner wrote a telegram to the Nandi district commissioner saying that "I fully support your and ADC attitude." He then wrote a letter to Ruto dated April 5, 1954, stating that he would not be of much help. Ruto received the letter with dismay. He had greatly banked on the provincial commissioner Wainwright to be more objective, and it was here that he rested his bid, leaving everything to God. They retreated to prayer, hoping that someday they would be allowed to start their own school. It was not until independence nine years later, and the abolishing of the colonial rules on education, that the school at Kaplemur was eventually established. Today it serves a large community, but only a few really know what it took to get it there.

The Church at Kakiptui

Soon after Independence in Kenya, Ruto secured a seven-acre plot of land for the Kakiptui Seventh-day Adventist Church from a departing European named Derek Haggie. Working with the new Western Kenya Field

president they were able to secure the title deed in the name of the church. He continued in church service until his retirement in 1970. He continued to be an active evangelist in retirement, teaching and preaching in faraway areas and attending his local church. He was an Adventist continuously for a total of 82 years. His all-time favorite book was *God Speaks to Modern Man* by Arthur E. Lickey.⁶ He passed away on March 7, 2019, at the age of 110. He was survived by his wife of 80 years, Sara, and their 11 children.⁷

SOURCES

Letter dated May 13, 1950 (ADM:15/15/2/9/28; PC/NKU/2/23/7), Kenya National Archives, Nairobi, Kenya.

Sang, Godfrey K., Kili, and Hosea K. *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya*. Nairobi: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017.

NOTES

1. Silvano Chepsiror Ruto, interview by author, Kakiptui, July 14, 2014.

2. Godfrey K. Sang, Kili, and K. Hosea, *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya* (Nairobi: Gapman Publications Ltd., 2017).

3. Letter dated May 13, 1950 (ADM:15/15/2/9/28; PC/NKU/2/23/7), Kenya National Archives, Nairobi, Kenya.

4. PC/NKU/ 2/23/7 Kenya National Archives.

5. Ibid.

6. First published by Review and Herald Publishing Association in 1952, it also goes by the tile *Highways to Truth*.⁷

7. Sara Ruto, wife of Silvano Ruto, interview by Pastor John Kemboi, Kakiptui, March 24, 2019.