

# Native Religions and Seventh-day Adventists in the West-Central Africa Division

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The West-Central Africa Division of the Seventh-day Adventists oversees 22 countries.<sup>1</sup> The region is home to various native religions, including the Akan religion, Dahomean, Efik mythology, Edo religion, Hausa animism, Odinani, Sever religion, Yoruba Religion, West African Vodun, and Dogon religion.<sup>2</sup> Each religion is practiced in more than one country. Although the Seventh-day Adventist Church is among the few Christian denominations that came to West-Central Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Church encounters similar challenges with the native religions that the earlier Christian denominations faced in their attempt to Christianize the region.

## Early Approaches

The early Christian denominational missionaries, including Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist, employed various approaches to methods to reach the Africans with the gospel message. Some missionaries promoted syncretism by allowing converts to practice native religious activities alongside Christianity or replaced some aspects of the native practices with similar Christian traditions. Some missionaries saw the native religions as a continuity of Christian revelation. In contrast, others sought to eliminate the native religions.<sup>3</sup> Each of these approaches had challenges and theological implications as demonstrated in the history of the early missionary activities.

The native religions of West-Central Africa differ because each ethnic group has developed a distinctive way of engaging a religion of their choice in practice. At the same time, they have common elements that bind them as one native religion. These common characteristics that make the native religion a compelling force pose a significant challenge to the Adventist mission in West-Central Africa.

## Common Characteristics of the Native Religions

Underpinning each of the West-Central African native religions is the concept of reality that sees reality as comprising of two realms, spiritual and material. Present in this reality is a hierarchy of beings. The hierarchy consists of a Supreme Being, the source of all existence, at the pinnacle. Following in descending order are divinities, ancestral spirits, humankind, animals, plants, and matter. The Supreme Being is the universal spirit that cannot be contained in structures and owned by one people group. The Supreme Being is respected for His benefits but not as an institutionalized religious system.<sup>4</sup> To what extent the Supreme Being in the West-Central Africa native religions can be related to the Judeo-Christian God is debatable.

The divinities are perceived by some as directly coming from God, while for some they are the deified ancestral spirits, and still for others, they are personified natural phenomena like plants, rocks, mountains, rivers, lagoons, places, and spirit medium. Irrespective of who or what these spirit beings represent, they are regarded as intermediaries between God and humanity, and they manage the affairs of the earth. These deities have localized jurisdictions where they are worshipped with sacrifices offered to them directly in temples and shrines with priests and priestess dedicated to them. They are perceived to have been delegated with powers to serve as channels through which humanity can access the Supreme Being.<sup>5</sup>

The ancestral spirits, also known as the “living dead,” are familial spirits comprising of the dead individuals within a particular family and the tribal ancestors. Although unseen, they are said to be living with the living and responding to the needs of their posterity. They are also believed to be the custodians of their families and communities, providing moral leadership, protection, and warning of impending dangers. With their capability of communicating with both the living and the spirits, they form a link between the physical and spiritual realms. The living venerate the ancestral spirits following certain prescribed rituals and laws designed by families and communities to ensure ritual efficacy. The goal for the veneration of the ancestral spirits is to respect, sustain, and honor them. It is perceived that while the living live in expectation of joining the ancestral spirits, the ancestral spirits expect the rituals and ceremonies in their honor. Failure on the part of the living on issues of rituals and ceremonies incurs the anger of the ancestral spirits, which is expressed toward the living in the form of misfortunes. They are also said to punish individuals’ misbehavior that brings reproach to the family and community.<sup>6</sup>

The third group of spirits in the spirit realm are conceived to be evil spirits who are manipulated in sorcery, witchcraft, or magic for the purpose of undoing harm to human life incurred through demon possession and demonic control and harassment. Evil spirits are believed to generate diseases, infertility, failure in all forms of human endeavor, and suffering and can even cause death.<sup>7</sup>

A human being is said to be an embodiment of material and immaterial constituent parts in an organic whole. A person exists in the context of a community not only with extended family, tribe or clan but also with the deceased ancestors. A person is shaped into a moral being through rituals of initiations of life rhythm—series of passage rites from birth to death, after which one joins the ancestors. Personhood status is attained by

internalization and commitment to the social values, practices, and ethical principles prescribed by the community. Human existence is perceived in the holistic and integrated life of joint family living and communal participation.<sup>8</sup>

The African concept of life can be briefly described as a socio-religious system of solidarity that compels every family and community member to participate in the ceremonies, rituals, and rites sanctioned by the joint families and communities. It gives little to no room for individualism. A break from such compulsion is said to be an offense or a taboo punishable by the ancestral spirits. Offenders lose all rights as family and community members. They are stripped off of all privileges and disowned by their family and community; they forfeit the protection of the ancestral spirits and left to the evil powers.<sup>9</sup> The process of disownment sometimes induces emotional and physical assault on the offender.

## Challenges to Mission

The African socio-religious system of solidarity is a formidable force that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the West-Central region of Africa must overcome in order to grow and progress in the region. The church's worldview of reality, which is biblically grounded, calls for a life-changing experience that is entirely different from the West-Central African conception of reality that is rooted in fear of their ancestral spirits. Many West-Central Africans shy away from the Adventist message because of fear of malevolent spirits and their presumed capabilities, damage the ancestral spirits are culpable of causing in the event of disobedience, and stigmatization that accompanies family or communal abandonment. This is one of the factors that impede the progress of the Adventist Church in this part of the world. In 2018, the West-Central Africa Division had c. 865,000 membership in a c. 350 million population.<sup>10</sup>

Modernization, urbanization, and globalization have contributed to people migration and so, to some extent, fragmented joint family and communal living. This has helped many to accept the Adventist message and severed themselves from traditional socio-religious practices intended to honor ancestral spirits and other spirits beings. However, sometimes the Seventh-day Adventists are confronted with traditional practices such as, for example, in the event of the death of a family member. Some extended family members arrange for a traditional burial that is believed to guarantee a safe passage for the deceased to the ancestral spirit realm without obtaining the permission of the family member who is an Adventist. Widowed people and children are also subjected to some ritual conditions. For fear of what may happen if the rites are not performed, some Adventists are implicated in performing these rituals. An entire local church may be caught up in such a challenge upon the death of a member.

As a middle way, some Adventists do not engage in native religious practices but provide financial means for their observance to their extended family members. Some members succumb to the temptation of consulting the spirits for the want of material goods, health, wealth, and prosperity.<sup>11</sup> When a crisis such as sickness hits,

under the pressure of extended family members and the assumption that all misfortunes are spiritual, some are implicated in consulting with the spirits to obtain a quicker result, as they are made to believe will happen. Others, unknown to them, are linked with their socio-religious practices through articles given to them as gifts. The native socio-religious structure is certainly one of the factors that impede the progress of the Church in West-Central Africa. The growth rate of the church in this region of Africa was in the negative for three consecutive years. It plummeted to negative 17.48 percent in 2014 but has since gained a slow but steady increase in growth to about 7 percent in 2018.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the challenges, the native religions pose to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in West-Central Africa, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has gained prominence among the cultures that adhere to the native Akan religion. Two unique characteristics of the native Akan religion make its adherents perceptive to Christianity. First, the Akan religion acknowledges the existence of a Supreme Being and His presence amongst people. The presence of the Supreme Being is symbolized with *Nyamedua*, which literally means God's tree planted or its stump in every family house. *Nyamedua*, *Alstonia bonnie*, is usually a three-forked branch tree. The natives place an earthenware vessel sits filled with rainwater and herbs in the middle of the three branches for blessing and purification; this serves as an altar for the joint family, that adheres to the native Akan religion, where sacrifices are made and libations poured at frequent periods.<sup>13</sup> Ever so often, water is drawn from the earthenware vessel to bless members of the family or visitors.

The nature, names, and attributes of this Supreme Being of the Akan religion permeate every aspect of the life of the adherents such as drum language, idioms, proverbs, appellations, designs, patterns, carvings, and more. The religion assigns many names to this Supreme Being. Etymologically, each syllabus of the names stands for a characteristic of the Akan Supreme Being. Some of his names are *Nyame* (The One who satisfies those who have him, Supreme God), *Onyankopon* (The Great One who alone satisfies those who have him), *Odமாகoma* (infinite Creator), and *Tweeduapon* (Almighty dependable God). Incommunicable (*Amosu*—the Giver of rain; *Amowia*—the Giver of sunshine; *tetekwaframo*a—eternal one) and communicable attributes (*seadeye*—the faithful one; *kantamanto*—one who does not break his pledge) are ascribed to the Supreme Being. Most of the names of the supreme God of the Akan religion are usually compounded with *Kwame*, such as *Nyankopon Kwame* and *Tweeduapon Kwame*. Stemming from the name *Kwame* is the second unique characteristic of the Akan indigenous religion. *Kwame* is the name for a male child born on Saturday. Saturday is called *Memeneda*, meaning satisfaction day of I Am or the I Am's day.<sup>14</sup>

For these characteristics of the Akan religion, the Seventh-day Adventist concepts of God and the Sabbath resonate well with the subscribers of the Akan religion. The growth rate of the Seventh-day Adventist church among the people of the Akan religion is significant, although not without challenges.

As already indicated, the core force driving the African native socio-religious structure of life is the power of the beings in the middle level of the African concept of reality, namely the ancestral spirits' power. Any conversion

from the native religions without a proper denunciation of the African worldview of ancestral spirits may lead to syncretism and dual allegiance. The biblical world view of reality confirms the existence of spiritual powers. The Scripture describes them as being in opposition to God and His followers; a Christian fight is against these spirits (Ephesians 6:10-12). They are also depicted as capable of enslaving human beings (Galatians 4:8-11). However, Christ has overcome all evil powers through His death and resurrection. Thus, the Seventh-day Adventist response to the African native socio-religious structure must include strategic approaches that will focus on Christ and His achievements for humanity and denouncing all evil powers and practices that enslave people through fear and false teachings and lifestyle.<sup>15</sup>

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## NOTES

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