

# Chetambe, Petero (c.1903–1990)

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## 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*.

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Petero Chetambe was a pioneer Luhya Adventist, pastor, teacher, and church planter among the Luhya people in Kenya.

## Early life

Petero Chetambe was born in Maturu village in Lwandeti about the year 1903. A member of the Tachoni sub-ethnic group among the Luhya, he began his education with the Quaker missionaries in the area, who were already working there in the 1920s. He did not go far in his formal education, but learned enough to continue through self-education.

## Becoming an Adventist

In 1933, pioneer Nandi evangelist and canvasser Caleb Kipkessio araap Busienei moved into Shandike, some distance away in Luhya country, to sell books. Caleb had become an Adventist in 1916 while working in the home of David Sparrow, the South African settler farmer in North Nandi who came to British East Africa (Kenya) in 1911.<sup>1</sup> In 1931, Caleb, together with Ezekiel Kimenjo, opened up Kaigat, where the first Adventist church was built in northern Nandi.<sup>2</sup> He then became a literature evangelist in Kamagambo, training under Ron Carey and A.W. Allen. When he returned home to Kaigat, he decided to go to Shandike, not far from the border with Nandi. While there he met Chetambe and interested him in his books. He took up one of the books and began an earnest study.

Caleb went with Kimenjo on the next visit. Chetambe had also shared the book with two of his cousins, Mark Wambani, who taught at the Lukhokho Friends African Mission School,<sup>3</sup> and Ezekiel Namulanda. In 1935 Chetambe donated his land in his native Lwandeti to build a church, and the new congregation began meeting there. A school was also opened there. He also gave up his second wife, remaining with his first, Rebekah Kwashitubi. He also gave up smoking Indian hemp.<sup>4</sup> In 1936 Spencer G. Maxwell baptized the three men together with their wives, six in total. These were the first Luhya Seventh-day Adventists.

## Becoming an Evangelist

The Luhya people are Kenya's second most populous community.<sup>5</sup> The territory, known then as North Kavirondo, had remained unentered during the early colonial period, and Maxwell was excited that an unexpected window had opened. Maxwell quickly identified Chetambe to become an evangelist among the Luhya. Together with Caleb they organized a Sabbath School at Luandeti in 1935, which goes down as the first and oldest Adventist church in Luhya country.<sup>6</sup> Soon there was a vibrant Adventist following in the area.

## Moving to Chebwai

Maxwell began to scout for a suitable site for a mission station in Luhya country. Chetambe told him that he had some land at Chebwai which he would donate to establish a church and mission. Maxwell inspected the land in 1935, and saw it fit for a Mission Station. He had the four-acre plot secured, and designated W. Allen to write to the authorities for permission to establish an Adventist mission. The North Kavirondo Local Native Council, sitting in Kakamega, granted the request, and North-West Kenya mission was founded at Chebwai in 1936. That year Matthew Cochrane Murdoch and his wife arrived to commence the work.<sup>7</sup> Chetambe, whose education was still low by those standards, nevertheless became a vibrant evangelist. What he lacked in education he made up for in his enthusiasm.

By 1939 there were 45 baptized members in the Chebwai Mission and another 270 Sabbath school members.<sup>8</sup> By this time, Chetambe owned a bicycle which he rode to great distances on evangelism work. During the 1940 Ingathering Campaign, Chetambe went out and brought back £7.10s in funds. The next year he canvassed among the Indian shopkeepers and European government officials, raising an unprecedented £17.10s.<sup>9</sup>

During the construction of the mission facilities, Chetambe was appointed to supervise the work. He became a favorite in the mission circles, and during his evangelism work, helped establish various churches in the greater Kabras country, which was under the purview of Chebwai. In later years he was trained at Bugema with the aim of becoming a minister. In 1944 Peter Chetambe obtained his ministerial credentials.<sup>10</sup> Chetambe now became the congregational pastor at Kaigat and various other congregations in Western Kenya. He traveled about on his bicycle and became a household name among the Adventists of Western Kenya.

In 1948 Chetambe was sent to Mt. Elgon to serve as the district pastor. In 1954 he hosted the legendary African-American Pastor E.E. Cleveland (1921-2009), who conducted a campaign in an area named Mosobek in Mt. Elgon.<sup>11</sup> Chetambe he returned to Chebwai in 1956.

## The Early Churches and Schools Organized by Chetambe

The first churches Chetambe organized were at Lwandeti and Chebwai in 1935 and 1936. In 1939 he organized the church at Kakimany in Kimilili. The Adventist school at Kakimany was registered in 1941. Chetambe faced significant resistance to Adventism in these areas, but managed to convince the people. He worked closely with Murdoch to ensure that the schools received approval from the Local Native Council at Kakamega. He organized another school at Inguserai, and the church and school at Kimang'eti, which opened its doors in May 1942. This school came under disputation with the Friends (Quakers) Africa Mission, which had established its own school near the area in July 1941. The Administration set a strict two-mile radius between schools or churches of different denominations. The Friends Mission had initially established a church and a school, but closed the school, leaving the area. The Adventists, led by Samwel Mutsami and Jacob Andunga, constructed a church at Kimang'eti, but began to use it as a school. Pupils from the closed-down Friends Africa Mission soon began attending the Adventist school.<sup>12</sup>

## Family and Later Life

Peter Chetambe was married to Rebekah Kwashitubi who became his companion of over 50 years. Together they had seven children, five sons and two daughters. Chetambe retired in 1966 and continued in active evangelism. Rebekah died in 1986. Peter Chetambe died on February 13, 1990, and was laid to rest at his home in Shandiche next to his wife. A dormitory at Chebwai Adventist College is named after him, as well as the Chetambe Adventist Church in the Lwandeti District.

## Legacy

Chetambe became an ardent Adventist evangelist and a household name in Western Kenya, particularly during his active years 1925 to 1966. Tens of thousands of Adventists in the North-West Kenya Conference attribute their journey of faith to his work. He was also directly or indirectly associated with numerous Adventist schools and churches, particularly at Luandeti, Nzoia, Shandike (now Shandiche), Namagara, Kalenda, Shipala, Muganiro, Tengeti, Mutonyi, Chekulo, Luvambo, Navakholo, Tande, Matioli, Muyundi, Matsakha, Lugusi, Cheptuli and Maram.<sup>13</sup> These churches were established between 1937 and 1998.

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## NOTES

1. Godfrey K. Sang et al, *On the Wings of a Sparrow: How the Seventh-day Adventist Church Came to Western Kenya* (Gapman Publications, 2016), 4.
2. Ibid.
3. From a write-up on Chebwai Adventist School and College by Opanda Khatenya Wamalika, published in the ESDA (accessed July 4, 2021).
4. *British Advent Messenger*, March 26, 1943, 4.
5. 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census Volume I: Population by County and Sub-County, Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, (knbs.or.ke, accessed June 27, 2021).
6. Sang, 4.
7. *British Advent Messenger*, March 26, 1943, 4.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1945), 159.
11. *North American Informant*, January 1, 1956, 7.
12. Sang, 4.
13. Ibid.

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