

# Kenyadoto Mission

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Kenyadoto Mission is one of the oldest Adventist mission stations in Kenya. It is unique because it was founded by a lay person named Herbert James Sparks early in 1911. It was officially organized as a mission station in 1913. Kenyadoto Mission was dissolved in 1946 and moved to Ranen Hill as part of a new mission setup there. Ranen has since been organized as a local Conference under the West Kenya Union and, from it, came a new mission field – the Lake Victoria Field.

## Background

In November 1906, Arthur A. Carscallen founded the Gendia Mission. Carscallen (locally known as “Bw. Kaskal”) came to Kenya through the Port of Tanga in

Tanganyika (German East Africa) together with Peter Nyambo. They moved from Tanganyika to Lake Victoria and then to Kendu Bay which was under the jurisdiction of Chief Ougo Apela. Chief Ougo took them to Gendia where he could see Kisumu at a distance.

He later started looking for other areas and, in 1909, he opened Wire Hill as their second station. He then moved to open Gem as the third station in 1910 then Karungu came in 1912 as the fourth station. The fifth station was Rusinga on the island in 1912 followed by Nyanchwa as the sixth station that same year. In 1913, Kenyadoto (Rapedhi) was founded as the seventh mission station.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier, in 1911, a European hunter named H. J. Sparks pitched his tent at Rapedhi. Herbert James Sparks was a Seventh-day Adventist trader dealing in hides and skins. Born in South Africa in 1891, he moved to British East



Matthew C. Murdoch, longest serving Kenyadoto Mission director (1920-1928).

Photo courtesy of British Union photo archives.

Africa to pursue his trade. He immediately connected with Carscallen at Gendia, becoming a close confidante<sup>2</sup>. He was interested in buffalo and elephant skins together with ostrich feathers, so he moved to Kanyadoto where he pitched a tent and began to apply his trade. By then, the area was teeming with wildlife which preferred to live around a drinking pond there. The pond lent the area the name "Dak Tenge" (Wild Beasts' Pond), a name that is still used to this day.

It was his sharing of game meat with the locals that attracted many people to him. Sparks then called in the people every day, and on Sabbath, he started to teach them about the Bible. Some laughed when those who heeded his call knelt in prayer, associating it with a curse of exposing one's behind ("gumo") to another<sup>3</sup>. One of the early converts, Mariko Otieno assisted in the work at Kanyadoto.

Sparks remained at Kanyadoto for a year, then left the area to further pursue his business. By this time, he had constructed a church and had raised a congregation at Kanyadoto. Sparks remained in Kenya until his death in 1937.

## Under Alfred Matter

The first official missionary at Kanyadoto was Alfred Matter. He was born in Göttingen, Germany, in 1886 and attended the seminary at Friedensau, where he was baptized in 1912. He immediately left Germany and came to British East Africa as a missionary. After a brief stay at Gendia, he went to Kanyadoto. He built on the work of Sparks, who had brought a number of people to the faith. Sparks already had an evangelist working in the area named "Mariko Otieno."

## Brief Description of Missionary Work at Rapedhi

Herbert James Sparks, through Kanyadoto Chief Ouko Obong', employed Josia Obor, Cleopa Olang', and Barnaba Okeyo at the Mission Center with Mariko Otieno as the evangelist in charge of the work. From here, teachers were sent to other regions like Kwabwai and Kanyamwa. Barnaba Okeyo and Jakobo Olwa were sent to teach at Nyanchwa in Kisii.

In 1913, B. L. Morse (locally known as Bw. Amos), who was in charge of the education work, and J. D. Baker differed with Sparks over the teachers' pay. H. J. Sparks left in a huff. A number of people also left the faith as a result. On October 11 of the same year, L. E. A. Lane (nicknamed "Selo") went to Kanyamwa's Chief Gor Ogada and told him to prepare a place to set up a school. The chief gave the site but warned local people never to attend.

In 1913, Kanyadoto received their first missionary, Alfred Matter. Matter was a German. He worked at Kanyadoto until September 1914 when World War I started. He was forced to leave Kanyadoto and interned with the British to Kaimosi more than 100 miles away. For the next two years, there was no missionary at

Kanyadoto. Alfred Matter and his wife resumed the work at Karungu after his internship.<sup>4</sup> In 1917, he had a number of people ready for baptism.

## First Baptism and First Camp

On December 4, 1917, the first baptism took place at Rapedhi. Among those baptized were Cleopa Olang', Elija Dande, Nicanor Agonda, Paul Apamo, Peter Pundo, Narman Oring'o, Stephen Ojwang', Debora Obiero, Thadayo Agola, Clement Kotonya, and Esta Atieno.

The first camp meeting was held in 1933 at what is currently the market center. Guests included W. W. Armstrong, E. R. Warland, Paul Mboya (as the translator), and Joel Omer. W. T. Bartlett (former director at Gendia), who had gone back to England, was also present. The theme song was *Standing by Purpose True (Dare to Be a Daniel)*.<sup>5</sup> The camp comprised of people from Karungu, Kadem, Gwassi, Kwabwai, Kamagambo, Kuria, and Sakwa. A total of Sh. 300 was collected as offering. Camp meetings were later moved to Rongo because of school students but transferred again to Kanga for shortage of water at Rongo.

Meanwhile, Kanyadoto was also developing into a commercial centre. Andrea Anindo (father to the late former MP Oluoch K'Anindo) established the first shop at Kanyadoto in 1920.

## Medical Work at Kanyadoto

Returning to Kanyadoto after the war, Alfred Matter began offering treatment to the people who came to him with medical problems. In 1917, Carscallen recognized his work and writing in the *Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald*, commended him for doing "...more medical work than the rest of us."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps taking their cue from Matter's medical work at Kanyadoto, it was decided that a properly trained doctor would be sent there. In 1920, Dr. G. A. S. Madgwick was sent over to Kanyadoto. He had only recently taken an additional course in tropical medicine in London, and when he came, he stayed briefly at Gendia before moving to Kanyadoto.<sup>7</sup> He became known to the Luo as "Bwana Majwek."

Dr. Madgwick worked under very difficult conditions. He had to his surgical instruments in kerosene tins on an open fire. He performed surgeries on a kitchen table inside a mud hut with a grass-thatched roof. However, his surgeries were always successful. In all the time he performed his surgeries (1921-1924), there were no infections from the poor operating environment or casualties from it. He even conducted surgeries on Europeans under the same conditions. As in most places in Africa, child mortality was a big problem. Under Dr. Madgwick, babies born in the facility had a much better chance of survival.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, even Alfred Matter's son named Alfred, was born in that facility.

The decision to move the medical work to Gendia was not received well by the residents of Kanyadoto. Dr. Madgwick left for England on furlough in 1924 and, in July that year, work began at Kendu to build a new

hospital. When he returned in January 1925, the facility was nearly ready for use.<sup>9</sup> In January 1925, he moved to Kendu and began working in the yet-to-be completed facility. Medical work ceased at Kanyadoto, but the mission continued. Alfred Matter left for the Belgian Congo to work with D. E. Delhove.

In 1920, W. W. Armstrong came in to take over the work in Kanyadoto. By 1924, Kanyadoto had 154 members in the Adventist Church and was described by L. H. Christian, the General Conference vice president for Europe, as "...our strongest mission in Africa."<sup>10</sup>

## Tragedy at Kanyadoto

The first church at Kanyadoto was built in 1911 by Herbert Sparks. It was a big grass-thatched gable structure where services were conducted twice a day. In the morning, people received porridge, and afternoon services were conducted after eating lunch. Tragedy struck one Sabbath around October 1920 as Barnaba Okeyo conducted the services. It started raining, and wind blew furiously, threatening to tear the fragile church apart. Daniel Orwa from Mori – who liked imitating the missionaries' accent using the local dialect – insisted that nothing would happen as God was with them.

Unfortunately, the building collapsed, trapping worshipers who wailed in pain and shock. Falling timber rafters had hit Rebecca Oimba ("Omware") and her baby, killing both immediately. Rebecca was the wife of Harun Ojwang from Kanyimach.

Zakaria Ojwang (father to the late Rtd. Pastor Isaac Ojwang) set out on foot to alert the missionary at Karungu. His speed was legendary as he was the "postman" and could go to such distant places even twice a day.

## A New Church for Kanyadoto

In 1925, plans were made to construct a permanent church. The only problem was that building materials were too far away. People worked together as they carried building materials by hand from as far away as Sori (31 km) and Homa Bay (34 km). School children carried a stone as they came to classes each morning. Sand could only be obtained from a distance of 27 km.<sup>11</sup>

They composed a song that motivated them in their labor:

"Ka in ikelo achiel,	"If you bring one,
An bende akelo achiel	And I also bring one
Ndalo duto watiyo gi more,	All the time we work with happiness,
Mondo wakony tich Nyasaye:	To help God's work:
Ka ikelo achiel -	And as you bring one -
Wakeluru achiel achiel,	Let's bring one by one,
Mondo wachop tich."	To complete the task." <sup>12</sup>

In no time, enough material had been assembled, so the construction started. W. W. Armstrong worked hard to see the building completed. Despite the fact that he received from Mission funds only about a quarter of what he needed to build the school, he rallied the people to raise the rest of the money.<sup>13</sup> The previous school building had collapsed in 1920, and the church too had been in danger of collapse, the large poles having been reduced to dust by the borer and ants. The two buildings had been put up by Sparks, and the poles used had been cut green from the forest. Rats had also infested the thatch building and once, during the church worship service, a snake caused commotion when it was spotted in the roof.<sup>14</sup> The dust also came in plentifully, and when it rained, it turned into a mudbath both inside and outside the church building. Armstrong stated that he feared entering that building.<sup>15</sup> Armstrong took the matter to the committee, and Bartlett, together with other mission heads, agreed to reduce their appropriations to contribute to the Kanyadoto kitty. This raised the amount to about half of what was needed.

When Armstrong made the call one Sabbath, the following Sabbath the people brought in £6 13s.<sup>16</sup> This, according to Armstrong, was contributed at a great sacrifice. Then they ferried over five tons of materials by hand from far away. They also helped builder Brother F. Salway, who was the main contractor in many of the buildings in those early missions.<sup>17</sup> A fine building still stands today, nearly a century after all that effort was made. Armstrong also oversaw the construction of the school building.

In 1928, L. Gabrielsen took over from Armstrong. He remained in Kanyadoto for four years, leaving in 1932. By this time, the demand for Adventist education far outstripped what the church could offer. F. H. Thomas took over the work in 1932. In 1933, the Kanyadoto Mission had 71 full-time teachers and evangelists.<sup>18</sup> He only remained a year before moving to Gendia. In his place came Matthew C. Murdoch.<sup>19</sup> Murdoch left in 1936 to open up Luhya country, becoming the first missionary in Chebwai. H. A. Matthews took over from Murdoch and had come in from Eldoret where he had been in charge of the work among the Nandi, which was managed by the Northwest Kenya Mission based in Nakuru.<sup>20</sup>

Matthews remained in Kanyadoto until 1940 when C. J. Hyde took over. Matthews went to Karura near Nairobi. Hyde expanded the number of schools, and by 1945, there were 16 schools under the Kanyadoto Mission. T. F. Duke replaced Hyde in 1945 and took it up a notch higher, raising the number of schools to 25 with 59 teachers. There were also 12 evangelists and 1 African minister.<sup>21</sup>

## Transfer to Ranen Mission

T. F. Duke was the Mission director in 1945 when the decision was made to move the mission center to Ranen. The recommendation to transfer was made following the death of two European missionaries—Bwana Vine (locally known as “Bwana Ben”) and Bwana Kirk, both of whom died in Kanyadoto. The two possibly died of blackwater disease.<sup>22</sup> It is said that they were often clearing the thick bush that encompassed the surrounding areas, and it was infested with tse-tse flies and mosquitoes.

Duke divided Ranen into East Ranen and West Ranen. East Ranen Mission evangelists were: Jeremiah Oigo (director), Nicolas Opiyo, Malaki Osoo, and Mordecai Ating'a. West Ranen Mission evangelists included: Elisha Olero (Director), Gershon Kungu, Isaac Ojwang', Sylphano Ayayo, Thomas Nyarwanda, Silfano Acholla, Clement Kotonya, Timotheo Otega, and Nicanor Agonda.

## Conclusion

Rapedhi Church, the successor of Kanyadoto Mission, is the mother church of the Ranen Conference and the Lake Victoria Field. There are now over 1,000 churches organized from the simple structure hurriedly put together by Herbert Sparks. After the work moved to Ranen Hill in 1946, the Ranen Mission continued to grow and was eventually organized into the Ranen Field on December 28, 1961. It was organized from the Kenya Lake Field. By this time, Ranen Mission Station had 46 organized churches with 6,479 members.<sup>23</sup> Ranen Field continued until February 2010 when it was organized into a Conference under the leadership of Pr. S. Omolo Ayugi. By 2017, church membership in Ranen Conference had risen to 161,619 in 866 churches.<sup>24</sup> That same year, the Ranen Conference was divided to create the Lake Victoria Field. Rapedhi came under the new field. By 2018, the Lake Victoria Field had 509 churches with 74,331 members while the Ranen Conference had 508 churches with 108,952 members.<sup>25</sup>

The Adventist Church today continues to grow locally from its humble beginnings with an illustrious legacy and history, continuing to make ready a people prepared to meet the Lord.

## Kanyadoto Mission Directors

H. J. Sparks (1911-1913), A. Matter (1913-1920), W. W. Armstrong (1920-1928), L. Gabrielsen (1928-1932), F. H. Thomas (1932-1933), Matthew C. Murdoch (1934-1936), H. A. Matthews (1937-1940), C. J. Hyde (1940-1944), T. F. Duke (1945).

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### SOURCES

*ARH*, January 31, 1918.

*ARH*, June 26, 1924.

*ARH*, March 19, 1925.

Robinson, Virgil E. *Third Angel over Africa*. Unpublished manuscript, Helderberg College of Higher Education.

*Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, second revised edition. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1996. S.v. "Kanyadoto Mission."

*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association. Various years.

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## NOTES

1. "Kanyadoto Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1911, 1912, 1913, and 1914).
2. Ibid.
3. Orieny Josiah, an alumnus of Rapedhi Intermediate School, interview by Isaiah Oyoo, Rapedhi, February 3, 2019. He shares with a lot of passion the rich history handed down to him by his father who was among the first converts to stay within the missionary camp. The Wild beasts Dam ("Dak Tenge") is situated right within their current home.
4. *ARH*, January 31, 1918, 13.
5. Composed by P. P. Bliss.
6. Ibid.
7. Robinson, Virgil E., *Third Angel over Africa*, unpublished manuscript, Helderberg College of Higher Education.
8. Anyango Masela, one of the pioneers of Rapedhi Church, interviewed by Isaiah Oyoo at Rapedhi, March 24, 2019. Masela says, "Many mothers lost their children at infancy at an alarming rate, while those at the mission saw their children grow in good health. The people around thus referred to Rapedhi as 'a fountain of blessing'."
9. Robinson, 111.
10. *ARH*, June 26, 1924, 18.
11. *ARH*, March 19, 1925, 11.
12. Aketch, Emelda, Prayer Ministries leader, Rapedhi Church, interview by Isaiah Oyoo, Rapedhi, May 5, 2019. In one of her narrations, she says, "I recall when I was still a young woman, just newly married, as a way of motivation towards God's work, my grandmother often repeated this song to us both at church and home. It made us inculcate the sense of unity as the family of God."
13. *ARH*, January 14, 1926, 12.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. *SDA Yearbook*, 1933, 148.

19. *SDA Yearbook*, 1935, 150.

20. *SDA Yearbook*, 1937, 155.

21. *SDA Yearbook*, 1946, 167.

22. Jared Ochieng, the development leader, Rapedhi Church, Interview by Isaiah Oyoo, Rapedhi, February 28, 2019. Commenting on Rapedhi being the fountain of blessing, he says, "The people at the Mission had embraced the sanitation and hygiene as taught by the missionaries and thus and thus had better health. Poor health and hygiene led to the death of many children. If there is one thing we have come to appreciate as a church over the years, it is the health message."

23. *SDA Yearbook*, 1962, 182.

24. *SDA Yearbook*, 2018, 68.

25. *SDA Yearbook*, 2019, 74.

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